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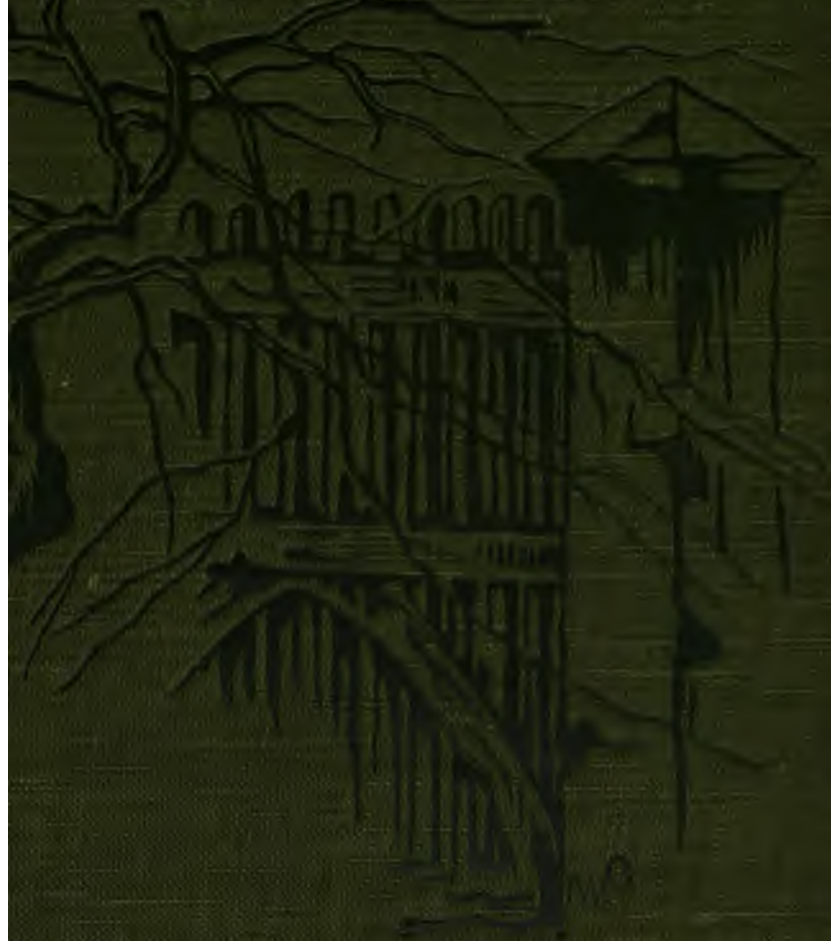
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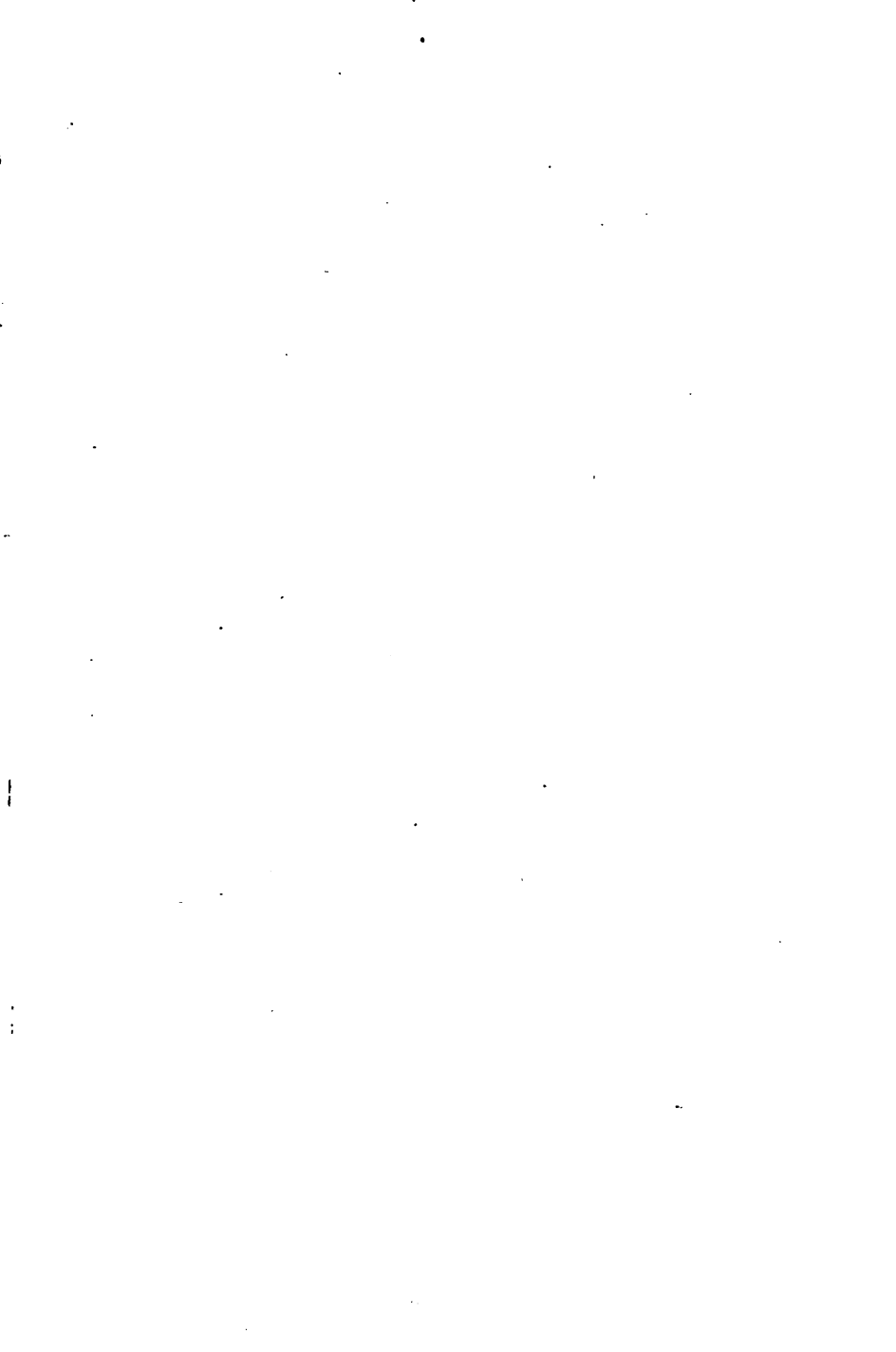
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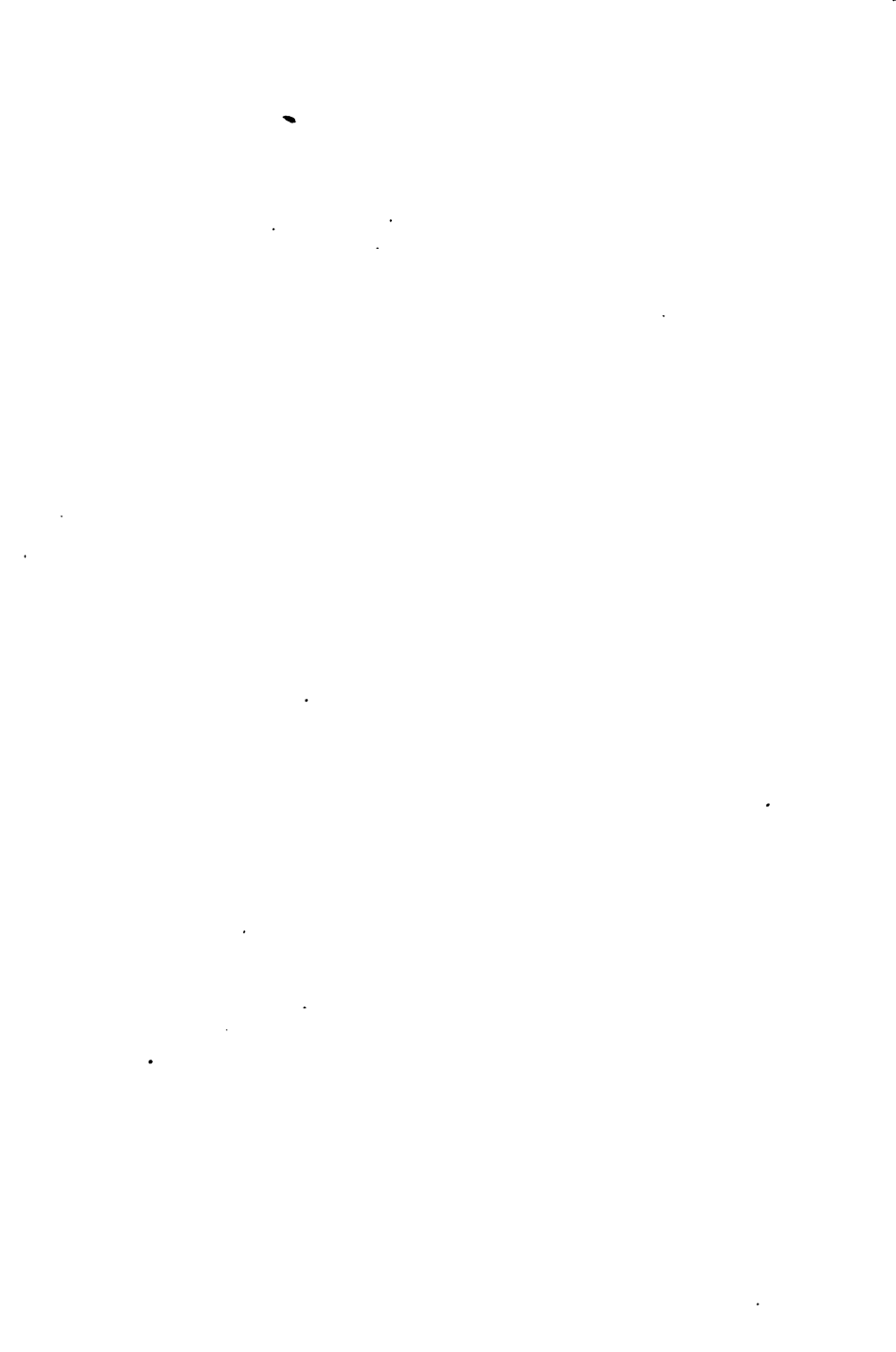
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KNOCK AT A VENTURE

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POST BRIDGE.

KNOCK AT A VENTURE

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET WOMAN," "THE AMERICAN
PRISONER," ETC., ETC.

New York

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To

MY FRIEND

William Crossing

**FIRST LIVING AUTHORITY ON PREHISTORIC
AND MEDLÆVAL DARTMOOR**

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MOUND BY THE WAY

MOUND BY THE WAY¹

CHAPTER I

WHERE the sylvan character of the scene changes; where fields give place to hanging woods and they in their turn thin to poverty and obliquity under eternal stress of western winds, a gate, resting by its own weight against a granite post, indicates the limits of agriculture and forestry upon the southern confines of the Moor. Beneath this standpoint Devon's unnumbered breasts billow to the misty horizon, and dimpling valleys, between the arable lands and higher wealds, are marked by orchards, water meadows and the winding ways of rivers. These, borne aloft, have come from far, and now, with slower current and ampler volume, roam melodiously through pleasant lees, through denes and dingles of sweet flowers, beneath the music of birds and the shadows of great woodlands, to their confluence with the sea. Here, too, lie hamlets and rise crocketed church towers; peat reek sweetens the air; blue doves croon through blue smoke on

¹ Copyright, 1900.

many a low thatched cot; and life moves in simplicity and apparent peace. The habitations of men glimmer with white-washed walls at fringes of forests, at wind-blown crossways, about small village greens, on lonely roads, by steep hillsides and among sunny combes. Homesteads rise in isolation along the edges of the great central loneliness; whole villages lie in the lap of the hills; and the manifold planes of this spacious scene, whether under flying cloud-shadows or grey rain, midday sunlight or the splendour of summer moons, commingle in one vision, whose particulars only vary to the play of the dawn and sunset lights, to the hands of the roaming elements, to the seasons that bring in turn awakening life and music, high colour-pageants and dying pomps, ultimate sobrieties and snows.

Beyond the gate to the Moor rises a steep road of broken granite and flint. It climbs upward, straight and dogged, into the world of the heather and, pursued a little, reveals the solemn sweep and dip of the circumambient waste. To the skyline tumbles this billowy ocean, and the ripples upon the crest of each mighty wave are granite. Here rise the tors, adorned at this August season with purple ling to their footstools of stone; here subtend wildernesses between the high hills; and the sheep bells jangle upon them, and the red kine bellow from the watercourses. A rook, his feathers

blown awry, hops thrice, then ascends heavily; but the kestrel, with greater distinction of flight, glides away from his perch upon a stone, ere he swoops aloft with long reaches, to hang motionless in the air, like a brown star afar off. The moorland world extends in vast, undulating mosaic of olive and dun, thinly veiled by the bloom of the ling and splashed with golden furze and grey granite. The expanse is touched to umber and velvet warmth in sunshine; is enriched with the pure, cool purple of cloud-shadows; is brightened into sheer emerald-green, where springs burst from their peat-moss cradles amid seeding cotton-grass; is lightened throughout its sombre heath tones with glistening sheets of polished fern, where the tracts of the bracken stand under direct sunlight. There is warmth of colour in its breezy interspaces—warmth, won from the ruddiness of ripe rush-heads and manifold grasses all bending and swaying in waves under the wind.

At the junction of two roads, that cross at right angles within a hundred yards of the moor-gate, there stands a blackthorn of venerable shape. It is a deformed, grotesque tree, much bent and shrivelled. Its boughs are coated with close fabric of grey encrustations, but such clothing has failed to protect its carcase against a century of winters and biting winds. In autumn the scanty foliage is still bright-

ened by a meagre crop of fruit; but life crawls with difficulty up the zigzag bones of this most ancient thorn, while each spring its tardy sap awakes less of the tree, and leaves increasing concourse of abrupt and withered twigs to rot above and below the centre of vitality. Beneath this ruin you shall note a slight hillock of green grass, where foxgloves shake aloft their purple pyramids of blossom and a rabbit's hole lies close beside them. Of artificial barrow or modern burying-place there is no suggestion here; and yet this mound by the highway side conceals a grave; and the story of the human dust within it is the truth concerning one who lived and smarted more than a hundred years ago. Men were of the same pattern then as now, but manners varied vastly; and the Moor-man, who farms upon the grudging boundaries of that great central desert to-day, and curses the winds that scatter his beggarly newtakes with thistle-down and fern seed, might wonder at the tales this same wild wind could tell him of past times and of the customs of his ancestors.

Human life on the Moor is still hard enough, but modern methods of softening the rough edges of existence were even less considered in the beginning of the century, when American and French prisoners of war sorrowfully sighed at Prince Town. In those days the natives of the Devonshire high-

lands endured much hardship and laughed at the more delicate nurture of the townfolk, as the wandering Tuaregs laugh when their softer fellows exchange tent and desert for the green oases of many palms and sweet waters. Then food was rough on Dartmoor and drink was rougher. Cider colic all men knew as a common ill; most beverages were brewed of native herbs and berries; only upon some occasion of rare rejoicing would a lavish goodwife commission "Johnny Fortnight," the nomad packman, to bring her two or three ounces of genuine Cathay as entertainment for her cronies.

It was rather more than a century ago that one, John Aggett, dwelt within two hundred yards of the thorn-bush already described; and the remains of his cottage, of which the foundation and a broken wall still exist, may yet be seen — a grey ghost, all smothered with nettles, docks and trailing briars. A cultivated patch of land formerly extended 'around this dwelling, and in that old-world garden grew kale and potatoes, with apple trees, an elder, whose fruit made harsh wine, and sundry herbs, used for seasoning meat or ministering to sickness. No evidence of this cultivation now survives, save only the ruined wall and a patriarchal crab-apple tree — the stock that once supported a choicer scion, long since perished.

Here, a mile or two distant from Postbridge in the vale of Eastern Dart, resided John Aggett and his widowed mother. The cottage was the woman's property; and that no regular rent had to be paid for it she held a lucky circumstance, for John by no means walked in his laborious father's footsteps. Work indeed he could; and he performed prodigious feats of strength when it pleased him; but it was not in the details of his prosaic trade as a thatcher that he put forth his great powers. Business by no means attracted him or filled his life. As a matter of fact the man was extremely lazy and only when sports of the field occupied his attention did he disdain trouble and exertion. He would tramp for many miles to shoot plovers or the great golden-eyed heath poult and bustards that then frequented the Moor; he cared nothing for cold and hunger on moonlight winter nights when wild ducks and geese were to be slain; and trout-fishing in summer-time would brace him to days of heroic toil on remote waters. But thatching or the thought of it proved a sure narcotic to his energies; and it was not until Sarah Belworthy came into his life as a serious factor that the young giant began to take a more serious view of existence and count the ultimate cost of wasted years.

Man and maid had known one another from early youth, and John very well remembered the

first meeting of all, when he was a lanky youngster of eleven, she a little lass of eight. Like the boy, Sarah was an only child, and her parents, migrating from Chagford to Postbridge, within which moorland parish the Aggetts dwelt, secured a cottage midway between the home of the thatcher and the village in the valley below. Soon afterward the children met upon one of the winding sheep tracks that traverse the Moor on every hand. They were upon the same business, and each, moving slowly along, sought for every tress, lock or curl of sheeps' wool that hung here and there in the thorny clutch of furze and bramble.

The boy stopped, for Sarah's great grey eyes and red mouth awoke something in him. He felt angry because the blood flowed to his freckled face; but she was cool as the little spring that rose in their path — cool as the crystal water that bubbled up and set a tiny column of silver sand shivering among the red sundews and bog asphodels at their feet.

"Marnin' to 'e," said John, who already knew the small stranger by sight.

"Marnin', Jan Aggett."

"An' what might your name be, if I may ax?"

"I be called Sarah, but Sally most times; an' I be wool-gatherin' same as you."

"Hast-a got gude store?"

"But little yet."

"I'll shaw 'e all the best plaaces, if you mind to let me."

"Thank 'e, Jan Aggett. My mother's a gert spinner."

"An' my mother's a gert spinner tu."

"Not so gert as mine, I reckon."

"Never was better'n my mother."

"Mine be better, I tell 'e! Her spins black wool an' white together into butivul, braave grey yarn; an' auld Churdles Ash — him what's got the loom to Widecombe, do buy it for money, wi' gladness."

"Ban't much black wool in these paarts; an' my mother knits her worsted into clothes for me. But I'll share what I find with you now."

"I lay I'll find a plenty for myself."

"I lay you will. An' I'll shaw 'e wheer the blackberries be in autumn time, an' wheer the best hurts be got out Laughter Tor way; an' wheer the properest rexens for cannel-making¹ do grow."

"Sure you'm a very kind-fashioned bwoy, Jan Aggett."

"You'd best to call me just 'Jan,' like other folks."

"So I will; an' you'd best to call me 'Sally.'"

"Burned if I doan't then! An' us'll be friends."

¹ *Rexens for cannel-making.* Rushes for candle-making.

From that time forward the lonely children became close companions; and when years passed and Sarah ripened to maidenhood, while John brought forth a straw-coloured moustache and thick beard that matched his sandy locks, the pair of them were already regarded by their own generation as surely bound for marriage in due season.

There came an afternoon when the girl had reached the age of eighteen and John was just arrived at man's estate. They worked together during harvest time, and the thatcher, standing on a stack ladder, watched the girl where she was gleaning and likened her pink sunbonnet to some bright flower nodding over the gold stubbles. Presently she came to him with a bundle of good corn under her arm.

"'Tis long in the straw this year," she said. "You must thresh it for me when you can and hand me the straw for plaiting. I can sell all the hats an' bonnets tu, as I'm like to weave. An' parson do allus give me half a crown each year for a new straw hat."

John came down from his perch and picked up the little sheaf. Then, the day's work done, they dawdled up the hill, and Sarah, hot and weary, after toil in great sunshine, sometimes took John's hand, like a little child, when the road revealed no other person.

Up through the lanes from the farm of Cator Court to the higher land they made their way, crossed over the river nigh Dury and passed beside a wall where scabious drew a sky-blue mantle over the silver and ebony lichens of the granite. Pennyworts also raised their little steeples from the interstices of the old wall; briars broke its lines; red berries and black twinkled among the grasses, and dainty cups and purses of ripe seeds revealed their treasures; flowers not a few also blossomed there, while butterflies gemmed the golden ragwort, and bees struggled at many blossoms. A mellow murmur of life gladdened the evening, and the sun, slow sinking behind distant Bellever, warmed the world with rich horizontal light. At a break in the stones dripped a stream in a little dark nest of ferns. Here, too, stood a stile leading into heavy woods, and one sentinel beech tree arose at the corner of a game-keeper's path through the preserves. Hither, weary with her labours and desiring a brief rest, Sarah turned, climbed the stile, and sat down beneath the tree. John accompanied her and they reclined in silence awhile where the ripe glory of September sunshine sent a shimmer of ruddy and diaphanous light into the heart of the wood and flamed upon the bole of the great beech. A woodpecker suddenly departed from the foliage

above the silent pair. He made off with a dipping, undulatory motion and cheerful laughter, as who should say, "two is company and three none."

John turned to Sarah and sighed and shook his head while he tickled her hand with a straw from the sheaf. She did not withdraw it, so he came a little nearer and put the straw up her arm; then followed it with two of his own fingers and felt her moist skin under them.

She laughed lazily, and the music fired his heart and sluggish tongue.

"Oh, God, Sally, how long be I to dance upon your beck and call for nought? How long be I to bide this way while you hang back?"

"Us couldn't be gerter friends."

"Ess fay, but us could. Wheer do friendship lead to 'twixt men an' women? Dost hear? I knaw you'm butivul to see, an' purtiest gal in Post-bridge an' such like; an' I knaw a man o' my fortune an' poor brain power's got no right — an' yet, though 'tis bowldacious so to do, I ban't built to keep away from 'e. I peek an' pine an' dwindle for 'e, I do."

"'Dwindle,' dear heart! Wheer's the signs of that? You'm stronger an' taller an' better'n any man on East Dart."

"Did 'e say 'better,' Sally? Did 'e mean it? 'Tis a year since I fust axed 'e, serious as a man,

an' a dozen times 'twixt then an' now I've axed again. I swear I thought as I'd seen love light in them misty eyes of thine, else I'd have troubled 'e less often. But — but —"

"Wouldn't I have sent 'e away wi' a flea to your ear when fust you axed, if I'd meant all I said, you silly gawkim?"

Then he put his arm round her and hugged her very close. No artifice restrained the plump natural curves of her waist; her garments were thin and the soft body of her beneath them fired him.

"Give awver! You'm squeezin' me, Jan!"

"Say it then — say it out — or I'll hug 'e, an' hug 'e, an' hug 'e to death for sheer love!"

"You gert thick-headed twoad! Caan't 'e read awnly a woman's words to 'e? Haven't 'e found out these long months? Didn't 'e even guess how 'twas when we went christening Farmer Chave's apple trees down-along by night, an' I slapped your face for comin' to me arter you'd been fooling with that slammocking maypole of a gal, Tom Chubb's darter? You'm blind for all your eyes."

He gave an inarticulate grunt and poured huge noisy kisses on her hair and face and little ears.

"Christ A'mighty! Sweatin' for joy I be! To think it — to think you finds the likes o' me gude enough for 'e! Theer — theer. Hallelujah!"

He shouted and danced with the grace of a brown

bear, while she smoothed herself from his salutations and sat up panting after such rough embrace. Then he took out his knife and sought the beech tree behind them. Sunset fires were dying away. Only a starry twinkling of auburn light still caught the high tops of the tallest trees and marked them out against the prevailing shadows of the woods.

"'Tis a deed should be cut on the first bark as meets your eyes arter the woman's said 'yes' to 'e," declared John.

Then, turning to the trunk where lichens painted pale silver patterns on the grey, he set to work, at the height of a man's heart, and roughly fashioned the letters "S. B." and "J. A." with a scroll around them and a knot beneath to indicate the nature of true love.

"Theer let it bide, sweetheart, for our childer's childer to see when we'm sleepin' down-along."

"Go away with 'e, Jan!"

Presently they moved onward to their homes.

"Braave news for my mother," said the girl.

"Braaver news for mine," declared John.

The sun had set and the twilight was in Sarah's grey eyes as she lifted them to him. Together they passed upward, very slowly, with her head against his shoulder and his arm round her.

"'Tis a pleasant thing seemin'ly to have a huge gert man to love 'e."

"Ess fay, my bird! You'll live to know it, please God."

From their lofty standpoint spread a wide scene of waning light on a fading world; and above the eastern horizon, through the last roses of the after-glow, imperceptibly stole a round shield of pale pearl. Aloft the sleeping wind-clouds lost their light and turned slate-grey as the misty phantom of the moon gathered brightness, and the western nimbus of sunset faded away.

Then John took his lips from his love's and gave her the sheaf of gleaned corn and left her at her father's door, while he tramped on up the hill.

His mother trembled before the long-anticipated truth and knew the first place in his heart was gone at last.

"As purty as a pictur in truth," she said, "but something too taffety¹ for the wife of a day labourer."

"Not so," answered the man. "She'm an angel out o' heaven, an' she'll come to be the awnly wife worth namin' on Dartymoor. For that matter she ban't feared of a day's work herself, an' have awftentimes earned a fourpenny piece 'pon the land."

¹ *Taffety*. Delicate, dainty.

CHAPTER II

THROUGHOUT the week Samson Belworthy, the father of Sarah, swung a sledge and followed a blacksmith's calling at Postbridge; upon the day of rest his labours were of a more delicate sort, for he played the bass viol and pulled as good a bow as any musician around about the Moor. This man accepted John as a suitor to his daughter with certain reservations. He had no mind to dismiss Sally into poverty, and bargained for delay until Aggett had saved money, obtained regular occupation, instead of his present casual trade, and arrived at a worldly position in which he could command a cottage and thus offer his wife a home worthy of her.

From desultory application to the business of his dead father — a sort of work in which he had never much distinguished himself — John now turned his face upon the problems of life in earnest, and sought employment under a responsible master. His ambition was to win a place as gamekeeper or assistant keeper on the estates of the manor lord; but he lacked the necessary qualifications in the opinion of those who knew him; being in-

deed strong enough, courageous enough, and familiar enough with the duties of such a calling, but having an uncertain temper, by nature fiery as his own freckled skin in summer-time. Finally, his physical strength obtained for him daily work and weekly wage at Farmer Chave's. Into the establishment of Bellever Barton he entered, and, as cowman, began a new chapter of his life.

All proceeded prosperously during the autumnal progress of his romance. John gave every satisfaction, was said to have forgotten his way to the sign of the "Green Man" at Postbridge, and certainly developed unsuspected capabilities in the direction of patience and self-control. He toiled amain, attracted his master's regard and won the red-hot friendship of his master's son.

This youth, by name Timothy, returning from his apprenticeship to a brewer at Plymouth after futile endeavours to master that profitable business, decided to follow in his father's footsteps, much to the elder's disappointment. Timothy Chave elected to be a farmer, however, and coming home a fortnight before Christmas, he devoted his days and nights to the pleasure of sport as a preliminary to the tremendous application he promised when the new year should come. He was two years younger than John Aggett and a youth of higher intelligence and finer clay; but he

found in John an ideal follower by flood and field. There came a day, one week before the Christmas festival, when for particular reasons Tim desired a heavy bag. John was therefore begged off his farm duties, and the young men, rising by starlight, trod the high land and pressed forward before dawn toward Aggett's familiar haunts.

Young Chave, a lad of good repute and handsome exterior, had learned his lessons at Blundell's School, was accounted a very clever youth, and held in much esteem as a traveller and a scholar amidst the natives of Postbridge. His mother spoiled him and fooled him to the top of his bent; his father had been proud of him until the lad's recent determination to soar no higher than the life of a countryman.

This present excursion bore reference to a special event, as has been said. There were coming from North Devon to Bellever Barton, for the holiday season, sundry poor cousins of the Chaves. On Christmas Eve they would arrive, and, as a certain pretty damsel of seventeen was to accompany her elders, Timothy's generous heart determined that moorland delicacies must await her, if his right arm, long fowling-piece and liver-coloured spaniel could secure them. With this excuse he had won John Aggett away from the cow-byres, and together, as day broke, they passed southward

to Dartmeet, held on by Combestone Tor and presently tramped into the lonely and desolate fastnesses of Holne Moor. Here, with cautious passage across half-frozen swamps, the sportsmen sought their game.

To the progress of that day no part of this narrative need be devoted; suffice it that we meet the men again coming homeward under an early, universal twilight and a cold northern wind. In certain marshes, rumoured to send forth warm springs even at dead of frosty nights, John Aggett had found good sport, and now from the servant's waist-girdle a big bag bulged with two brace of teal, three snipe, two woodcock and a hare. Through the grey promise of coming snow they pushed homeward where the wind wailed a sad harmony in the dead heath, and all the ground was very hard save upon the black bogs that froze not. John was clad as the Kurds and Mountain Syrians to this day; he wore a sheep's pelt with the hair toward his body, the skin turned out. Arms of like material fitted into this snug vest, and his breeches were similarly fashioned. Timothy, as he faced the north wind booming over a heather ridge, envied Aggett, for his own garments, albeit stout enough, lacked the warmth of the natural skin.

"Colder and colder," he said, "and the last drop of sloe gin drunk and five good miles before us yet."

"'Tis so; but theer's Gammer Gurney's cot down along in a lew place under Yar Tor. If you mind to turn out of the way a bit, 'tis certain she'll have gude, heartening liquors hid away, though how she comes by the fiery stuff, an' the tobacco her sells in secret, an' the frill-de-dills o' precious silks an' foreign lace-work ban't my business to knaw."

"Good! We'll pay Gammer a visit. My father gets many a gill of brandy from the old rascal."

"In league wi' the Dowl, I doubt."

"More likely with the smugglers. Plenty of cargoes are run down Teignmouth way, and when they've dodged the gaugers and made a good haul, the farther they take their wares inland the better. She pays them well, be sure."

"She do awften talk 'bout a sailor son, come to think on't."

"Ay, many and many a sailor son, I warrant you! My father says her cognac is drink for the gods; yet if they are pleased to make him a Justice of the Peace, then he will adopt different measures with Mother Gurney, for a man's conscience must be set above his stomach."

"Her be a baggarin' auld sarpent for sartain, an' goeth through the air on a birch broom or awver the sea in a eggshell, an' many such-like devilries. In times past I judge the likes o' she would burn

for such dark wickednesses; though her did me a gude turn once, I'll allow."

While speaking, they had rounded the ragged side of Yar Tor, and then proceeding, passed to the north by some ancient hut circles of the old stone men. Following a wall, where the hill sloped, they found themselves confronted with the bird's-eye view of a lonely, thatched cottage. Below it the land sank with abruptness; before the entrance extended a square patch of garden. No sign of life marked the spot; but as the men climbed down a pathway through withered fern, they aroused a bob-tailed, blue-eyed sheep-dog which leapt, gaunt and apelike, to the limit of its tether and barked wildly at the intruders. A naked austerity, a transparent innocence and poverty, marked the spot to casual eyes.

"Down these winding ways, or else out of the woods below, come Mother Gurney's 'sailor sons' with their packs and barrels hid under innocent peat and rushes, no doubt," commented Timothy.

Then John Aggett knocked at the door with a modest tap and young Chave noted that he spat over his left shoulder before doing so.

"'Tis plaguey hard to be upsides wi' a witch, I do assure 'e; but she'm a wonnerful clever woman, as all in these paarts do very well knaw," confessed John.

CHAPTER III

GAMMER GURNEY dwelt quite alone and none had seen the alleged mariner her son, for the occasions of his visits were hidden in nocturnal mystery. Upon one point at least no doubt existed: the dame could vend choicest cognac to a favoured few at a shilling a pint; and those whom it concerned also knew that no such tobacco as that she sold, whether for smoking or chewing, might be otherwise procured nearer than Exeter. There was a whisper, too, of French silks and laces, concerning which the wives of the quality could have told a tale; and gossips of that district were prepared to swear upon the Book how more than once in moments of high excitement Gammer Gurney had uttered words and whole sentences of words in a heathen tongue. Yet, despite her powers and accomplishments, she always went her humble rounds with an old donkey in an older cart. Ostensibly she purchased rags and bones and other waste from farm kitchens; and those who knew not her peculiarities and pitied her lean apparition in its iron pattens, old sunbonnet and "dandy-gorisset" gown, would give her cast-off garments and orts from the table to keep life in her. Others,

better informed, well understood what was hidden in the donkey cart, and Gammer came as an honoured if a secret guest to many a great house on the countryside. Indeed half a hundred sea-dogs were her sons, and the smugglers thought a ten-mile tramp over Dartmoor no hardship when the Gammer's great discretion and the liberality of her prices for matters contraband came to be considered. In addition to these dark practices Mother Gurney was reputed a witch in her own right, but a witch of the better sort — a white wonder-worker, whose marvellous knowledge enabled her to combat the black necromancers that haunted Devon in those days to the detriment of honest folk. Their power of the evil eye; their unpleasant habit of overlooking innocent men and women, was quelled and crushed by Gammer's stronger if less sinister charms. To gain private ends, she fostered this vulgar opinion concerning her accomplishments; was much rapt in secret studies and claimed wide skill in medicaments and cures by drug and amulet for beast and man. Recoveries, indeed, were laid at her door with frank thankfulness; though whether the moorland herbs and rare simples, ostentatiously plucked at times of old moons and eclipses, were to be thanked so much as that ingredient of strong French brandy which entered into her prescriptions, may be left a matter of conjecture.

Upon the door of Gammer Gurney's mysterious home John Aggett knocked, then a little nut-brown woman opened to him, nodded without affectation of superior parts, and even curtsied in old-fashioned style at sight of Timothy.

"Your sarvant, young maister," she said. "Be pleased to step in, an' you'm welcome, I'm sure, though 'tis the home of poverty. Rest free, if that's your errand — rest; an' theer's a gude cushioned chair to hold 'e tu, though you mightn't count to find such here."

The white witch had no peculiarities. She merely suggested a venerable and time-worn body whose life had not lacked tribulations and whose tether must be near at hand. But her dark eyes were very bright and her activity of body was still apparent.

Timothy lolled in the great "grandfather" chair and a red peat glow flamed on his leather gaiters from the fire; John sat near the door with a wandering and uneasy eye, ready to discover mystery and read secrets at every turn. He knew that to ask openly for the cordial he desired had been to make a hole in his manners. He therefore waited for his master to speak.

Gammer Gurney mended the fire and chattered briskly.

"Theer'll be little more huntin' 'pon the high

Moor 'fore the snaw come. An' 'tis near now. It be given me to knaw 'bout what fashion weather us may look for by the birds an' berries, by the autumn colour of leaves, by tokens hid in still waters an' the callin' of the cleeves."

"The reds was in the sky this marnin'," said John, "a savage, sulky sunrise, I warn 'e."

"I seed un; an' a terrible braave sight of snaw unshed in the elements; an' the airth ripe for it. Gert snaw an' ice be comin', wi' sorrowful deep drifts an' death to man an' beast, an' awfullest floods to follow arter. I've knawn this many days an' laid in store against it."

Timothy now saw his opportunity.

"And I'm going to add to that store if you'll let me. There's a fine hare in the bag."

"A hare, did 'e say? They'm dark, fanciful beasts, an' if I was anything but a honest woman, I'd not touch no such thing. But I knaw what I knaw. Wheer did 'e find un?"

"I shot un," said John, dragging the animal forth. "Her was sittin' aquott under a tussock nigh Horn's Cross on Holne Moor."

"Then 'tis a pure, natural beast wi' no dark tricks to un, if 'twas theer. A witch hare wouldn't go in them plaaces. A right hare — sure enough, an' heavy tu. Thank 'e kindly; an' if you comes round arter Christmas I'll cure the skin for 'e, Jan

Aggett. 'Twill make a proper cap against the hard weather."

John scraped and offered respectful thanks; then refreshments became the subject of Timothy Chave's speech.

"You haven't a cup of milk by you, mother? I'm thirsty as a fish."

"Milk — ess fay; but none for you. Ban't drink for grawed men, if you ax me. But I've — well, no call to name it. Yet 'tis a wholesome sort o' tippie took in reason an' took hot. You bide here. I'll be back direckly minute."

She disappeared through a low door at the side of the kitchen and locked it behind her. In five minutes she returned with the promised refreshment and poured it from a square earthenware crock into two large cups. These she half filled with brandy, then added hot water from a kettle, and finally dropped a lump of yellow candy into each, with mingled spices from a shining black box.

"'Twill dc 'e a power o' gude an' keep away evil an' make heroes of 'e," declared the woman. Then she watched the drinking men, with pleasure in her bright eyes, and shewed that she appreciated their grunts and gurgles of satisfaction.

"Better'n milk?" she said.

"A godlike brew!" declared Timothy; and John, who had waited to see his master drink first

before venturing upon the witch's gift, now gave Gammer Gurney the compliments of the blessed season with all respect, then drained the last drop of his refreshment and scraped out the remaining spice and sugar with his fingers.

"Sure I feels like a mighty man o' Scripture compared to what I was a bit ago," he declared, as the spirit moved him.

"You'd make your fortune if you set up a sign in a city and sold that stuff to all buyers," prophesied Timothy.

"I wants no fortune, Maister Chave. I be here, an auld sawl well thought 'pon an' wi'in call o' friends. I tell no tales an' breed no troubles, an' what goes in my ear doan't come out at my mouth wi' a new shape to it, I assure 'e. No tale-bearer me. Tongue an' ear strangers — that's the wise way."

"You'm wise enough, ma'am; everybody knows that."

"Not that I set up for anything above my neighbours, though I may have done 'em a gude service here an' theer."

"A many of 'em — Lard, He knows how many," declared John, eagerly. "Taake my awn case. Didn't 'e tell me how to win my maid for a silver sixpence, an' didn't I do as you bid an' worrit her marnin', noon an' night till she said the word?"

An' didn't Digory Crampiron, the shepherd, come to 'e 'pon the same cause an' ax what fashion woman 'twas as he'd best pay court to? An' didn't you say her'd be a dark maid? An' sure enough dark her was; an' a gude wife an' mother these many days now."

"That's the thing I'd like to hear!" cried Timothy. "Read me riddles, Gammer. Tell me my fate in marriage, and when the girl is coming, and what she'll be like. Tell me, and I'll give thee a golden guinea!"

Now it fell out, strangely enough, that the white witch knew certain facts hidden from her questioner — facts that none the less concerned him in some measure. She had that forenoon visited Bellever Barton to find the household of the farm in some confusion. The Christmas guests had arrived three days earlier than they were expected; that circumstance being explained by an opportunity to travel cheaply to Moretonhampstead on a stage-coach, some of whose passengers had failed it. From Moreton to Postbridge was no great matter, and the male travellers had ridden that distance, bringing their luggage on a packhorse and their ladies upon pillions behind them. In the bustle and confusion caused by this premature advent, Gammer Gurney was kept waiting in the buttery — treatment very rarely extended to her

dignity. But this delay had not been wasted. A garrulous housekeeper explained circumstances to the old woman and added that one of the newcomers, a girl of a fair face, reserved manners and great good sense, had won Farmer Chave's heart, and was by him secretly destined for Timothy without that young man's knowledge. This maiden the Gammer had seen and spoken with before she departed homeward; but as for Tim, he knew nothing of the business. Thus it may be guessed what excellent matter for a prophecy was now at the hand of the white witch. Indeed, she had oftentimes done miracles in the public esteem with less promising material. Nevertheless, this circumspect woman shewed no eagerness to take young Chave at his word.

"Best to think twice 'fore you ax me that," she answered. "'Tis a serious deed, boy, and not to be undertaken in a light spirit. Mind this tu: the truth ban't always sweet or what our ears are best tuned for hearin'."

Her respectful manner vanished upon the introduction of this theme. She now spoke as the young man's superior. Timothy was not frightened from his purpose, however, and screwed his face into solemnity. Then he winked behind Gammer Gurney's back at John Aggett, who, knowing well how witches have eyes behind and before, doubted not

that the action had been observed and was much discomfited in consequence.

"Here's your guinea, mother; that'll shew you I'm in solemn earnest upon this matter."

The wise woman instantly swept up the coin.

"If you will, you will," she said.

As a preliminary to the fortune reading, two rush candles were lighted and the table cleared. Then upon it the sibyl drew a half circle with black charcoal and spread ancient cards round the circumference. Next she set up in the midst a lump of shining quartz, of the sort known as Cornish crystal, and into a natural cup within this stone she poured the black contents of a small, strangely shaped bottle. Now, bidding them be silent and motionless, with impenetrable gravity she went upon her knees beside the table and so remained for a long five minutes. Sometimes she gabbled to herself, sometimes she set her hands upon a conjunction of the outspread cards; but her eyes, as it appeared, never closed for a moment and never for a moment wandered from the little black lake in the quartz discerning-glass.

John, deeply impressed, sat with his mouth open; and even the scholar felt his scepticism waning a trifle.

Presently Gammer Gurney began to talk, and after much moonshine and a whole rigmarole of

promises, predictions and cautions, the witch broke off and scanned the crystal with increased intensity.

"Terrible coorious!" she murmured in an audible aside. "No such thing as this ever happened afore, I should judge. What's the day of the month?"

"Eighteen of December," said John.

"Exacally so! An' if—theer! Of all strange fallings-out!"

She gazed blankly at her guest until Timothy, despite his education at Blundell's, grew a little uncomfortable.

"Well, well, what's amiss, mother? Out with it for good or ill. What pitfall is waiting for me—an early marriage?"

"A maiden be waitin' for 'e, Timothy Chave; an' this very day—a grey-eyed young girl wi' bright hair an' cherry lips—this day—by picture an' by crystal! She'm nearer than the coming snow—she'm at your elbow, man! Ess fay, first young woman as you see an' speak with come the owl-light—her an' none other will be your lifelong mate!"

"Merciful to me! 'Tis 'most owl-light now!" gasped John Aggett.

"By St. George, and the dragon too, I'm near my fate then! Up and off, John! I'll see my bride before nightfall. Come on."

The woman huddled up her cards, cleaned the

table and poured the black liquid into the fire. Timothy was eager to be gone, and now took an abrupt leave of his soothsayer; while as for Gammer Gurney, she stood like one in a dream and regarded Tim with vacant eyes. It was her custom thus to appear elevated in the spirit after exercise of her remarkable gifts. So they left her at her cottage door and started for home at a good pace. The fresh air contributed much to blow superstition out of Timothy's mind; but his companion continued taciturn and was evidently impressed by what he had seen and heard.

"She gave I goose-flesh down the spine, for all her outlandish fiery drink," he said.

"You're a fool, John; an' I'm a greater. A good guinea wasted."

Nearing home, they turned off the Moor, passed the cottage of Aggett's mother, and proceeded along the hill. Then it was that John, desiring to shift the game-bag from his girdle to his shoulder, hung back some forty paces. His fingers were cold and the buckle was stiff; his master therefore gained upon him and, passing the corner of a plantation, went out of sight. Mending his pace to overtake the other, John heard hidden voices, the hour then being dusk; and, a moment later, coming round the corner of the woodlands, he saw Timothy Chave in conversation with a woman. She was clad in

scarlet flannel even to the snug hood round her ears, and her figure shone brightly through the gloaming.

He heard words half laughing, half annoyed, in the girl's uplifted voice.

"Who be glazin' at then? Make way, caan't 'e? Do 'e think I be a ghost out the wood?"

"Not a bit of it! A good fairy, more likely. And forgive me; I wanted so much to hear you speak."

"You'm a very impident chap then, for all your gert gashly gun awver your shoulder!"

The woman passed Timothy light footed, then, turning quickly down a lane, she disappeared, just as John joined his master. The young man was in an extremity of excitement.

"Good God! Did you see her — that red girl? An' after what the hag said! Her eyes, man! Eyes like stars in the dark and a voice like the wood doves! I came straight upon her peeping out of her red hood, like the queen of pixies! Who is she, John? Who's her father? And where has she vanished to? Speak if you know. 'Tis a marvellous miracle of a thing that I should meet her in this way. I could swear I was dreaming; yet I'm as much awake as she was alive. Who in the name of wonder is she? Speak if you know."

"She'm a maiden by the name of Sarah Belworthy, darter o' Smith Belworthy; an' she'm tokened to me," said Aggett, stolidly.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN'S announcement awoke a laugh in the younger man, and Timothy dismissed the subject with a sort of lame apology; but the other remained dumb after his assertion, and few more words passed between them. Aggett, however, burnt within, for the recent incident had caused him infinite uneasiness and alarm. To allay these emotions he hastened to the home of Sarah as soon as his duties at the farm were ended, and there, before her parents, rated her in round terms for speaking to a strange man under the darkness. The girl's mother heard of what had happened with secret interest; Sarah herself laughed, then cried, and finally made her peace with many promises that no light action in this sort should ever again be brought against her. Of the white witch and the prediction John did not speak; and though he returned to his loft above the cows a comforted man, yet, in the hours of night, fear and foreboding gripped his heart again and frank terror at the shadow of an awful catastrophe made him toss and sweat in the darkness. Twice he rose and prayed childish prayers that his mother had taught him. They were noth-

ing to the purpose, yet he trusted that they might call the Almighty's attention to him and his difficulties. So he lay awake and scratched his head and puzzled his scanty brains with what the future held hidden.

As for Timothy, the splendid twilight vision of Sarah in her red array was by no means dimmed by the subsequent appearance of his own fair kinswoman. A first fiery love had dawned in him, and the romantic circumstances attending its awakening added glamour to the charm of mystery. Already he almost granted Gammer Gurney a measure of the powers she pretended to. Aggett's statement had iced his ardour for a while; but a bitter-sweet yearning and unrest grew again after the cowman was gone — grew gigantic to the shutting out of all other things feminine; and Sarah's grey eyes, not his little cousin's, were the lamps that lighted Timothy's midnight pillow.

In the morning he gave himself great store of practical and sensible advice. He told himself that he was too good a sportsman to interfere with another's game and poach on another's preserve; and he assured himself that he was too excellent a son to fall in love with a blacksmith's daughter and sadden his mother's declining days. He laughed at himself, and, when he met John after breakfast, spoke no more of the incident. He grew self-

righteous toward noon and was secretly proud of himself for having withstood the fascination of Sarah Belworthy's face and voice with such conspicuous ease. He told his conscience that the fancy was already dead; he felt that it would be interesting to meet the girl again; and he assured himself that her image in full, garish daylight must doubtless fall far below the perfection that it suggested half veiled under coming darkness. During that afternoon he marvelled a little at his own restlessness, then sought occupation and decided that it would be well to have his horse's shoes roughed. He knew under this explicit determination lurked implicit desire to see the father of Sarah Belworthy, but he did not give his mind time to accuse him. He looked to his horse himself; he was very busy and whistled and addressed those he knew about him, as he trotted down to the smithy, feebly trying to deceive himself.

A black cavern gaped out on the grey day, and from within came chime of anvil and hoarse breath of bellows. But it was not the spluttering soft red-hot iron that caught Tim's eye. A lurid figure appeared and disappeared like magic as each pulse of the bellows woke a flame that lighted up the forge. This vision now gleamed in the blaze, then faded as the fire faded, and Timothy knew it for his pixie queen of the preceding night. Such an

unexpected incident unnerved him; for a brief moment he thought of riding on; but he had already drawn rein and now dismounted, his heart throbbing like the fire.

Sarah had brought her father some refreshments from home, and was amusing herself, as she had often done before, with the great leathern bellows, while a lad worked at the anvil and the smith rested from his labour and ate and drank.

Smith Belworthy gloried more than common in two possessions; his daughter and his bass viol. Sometimes he mentioned one first, sometimes the other. To-day, having greeted Tim with great friendship and not forgetting the incident of the previous night, he bid Sarah step forward, much to her mortification, and drew young Chave's attention to her as though she had been some item in an exhibition.

"My darter, young sir, Sally by name. Theer's a bowerly maid for 'e! An' so gude as she'm purty; an' so wise as she'm gude most times. Awnly eighteen year auld, though all woman, I assure 'e. But tokened, maister — tokened to a sandy-headed giant by name of Jan Aggett — her awnly silly deed, I reckon."

"The best fellow in the world," said Timothy.

"Maybe, but who be gude enough for the likes o' she? My li'l rose of Sharon her be; an' the

husband as I'd have chose should have been somebody, 'stead of nobody. But theer she is, an' I lay you've never seed a purtier piece in all your travels, have 'e now?"

The blacksmith grinned affectionately, held Sarah's arm in his grimy grip and surveyed his daughter as he had gazed upon some prize beast or a triumph of the anvil.

"Doan't heed un," burst out Sally, her grey eyes clouded, and her face as red as her gown. "Never did no girl have such a gert gaby of a faither as me. His wan goose be a royal swan, an' he do reckon all the countryside must see wi' his silly eyne an' think same as him — fond auld man!"

The cold light of day and the forge-glow struck her face alternately as she moved. Young Chave was a man and not a stock or a stone. Therefore he seized the hour and answered her remark.

"You shouldn't blame your father for telling the truth, young mistress," he said. "Even though it suit you not to hear it. Yet when 'tis so pleasant and so generally accepted, it might well be agreeable to you."

"Theer's butivul scholar's English," chuckled Mr. Belworthy; "theer's high gen'leman's language, an' the case in a nutshell!"

Sarah grew shy and uncomfortable. Angry she could not be before Tim's compliments, and how

to answer him without contradicting him she did not know. So she turned to her father instead.

"Be gwaine to eat an' drink up your food or ban't 'e, faither?"

"All in gude time. I've got to rough the young gen'leman's horse's shoes fust."

"Be in no hurry," said Tim. "I can wait awhile."

"I can't then," declared Sarah, ungraciously, and so marched off in a fine flutter of mingled emotions.

Mr. Belworthy looked up from the hoof between his knees and winked with great significance at Timothy.

"Kittle cattle — eh? Look at the walk of her! Theer ban't another girl this side Dartymoor as travels like that. 'Tis light as a bird, an' you'd doubt if her'd leave a footprint 'pon new-fallen snow."

"So Diana walked," declared Tim.

"Did her? A Plymouth maiden, I s'pose?" asked Mr. Belworthy, with simulated indifference.

"No — a goddess of ancient times — just a moonbeam shadow, you know. Not a splendid flesh and blood beauty like your daughter."

There was no sound but the rasping of the file; then Belworthy spoke again.

"Tokened to a man as'll never rise much beyond Bellever Barton cow-yard — that's the mischief of

it. Her, as might have looked so high, seein' as the body of her an' the faace of her be what they be. Not a word 'gainst the chap, mind. Brains is the gift of God, to be given or held back according to His gude pleasure."

"Such a clever girl, too, I'll warrant. What did she see in John Aggett, I wonder?"

"Clever in a way, though not so full of wit as my cheel might have been prophesied. Me bein' generally reckoned a man of might on the bass viol Sundays. But Sally's just Sally, an' I wouldn't change an eyelash of her. Power over musical instruments ban't given to women-kind, I reckon; though for plain singin' wi' other maidens in a plaace o' worship, she'm a tower o' strength. An' she be just a polished corner o' the temple prayer-times, no matter what gentlefolks comes theer. As to why she took on wi' Jan, I lay her couldn't give 'e reasons any more'n me. But so 'tis, an' though it mayn't never come to axing out in church, yet lovers be stubborn in their awn conceits. An' so — you being Farmer Chave's awn son an' heir — might, if you was that way minded, up an' say a word for Jan."

"So I will then. He's a right good fellow."

"'Tis the season o' herald angels, when hearts are warm, you see. An' six shillin' a week do taake a terrible long time to goody. Of course, Jan gets

cider, an' corn at market price tu; yet wi'out offence 'tis tail corn most times an' not stomachable — stuff as doan't harden muscle."

"My father would never give his men tail corn," cried Timothy, indignantly.

"Wouldn't he? Then I was wrong. I wouldn't go against un for all the tin hid on Dartymoor. But theer 'tis. I doan't see how the man's gwaine to save against a wife an' fam'ly unless his wage be bettered. An' I don't want to see my darter grow into an auld virgin mumphead while he's tryin' to scrape brass enough to give her a home. 'Tis wisht work such waitin'."

"I'll not forget John Aggett. He's a very well-meaning man, and honest, and a splendid shot."

"So he is then, an' a gude shot as you say, though I'll allus be sorry as he brought down my li'l bird."

"If she loves him, 'twill fall out all right, you know, Belworthy."

"If love could taake the place o' victuals an' a stone cottage an' a snug peat hearth, it might fall out right; but I'm sorry for the maiden's love as have got to burn at full pitch o' heat year arter year wi' marriage no nearer. 'Tis a withering thing for a girl to love on, knawin' in her secret heart as each winter doan't pass awver her for nought but leaves its awn touch o' coldness an' greyness. She hides it from the man, o' course — from every-

one else tu, for that matter, — but 'tis with her all the seasons through an' dims her eye, an' furrows her smooth young forehead at night-times unbeknownst to them that love her best."

Timothy doubted not that the blacksmith spoke truth, then he trotted off up the hill, and without set purpose overtook Sarah on her way home. Her voice and the frankness of her face thrilled him as she smiled shyly, her temper gone. Again she chid him for listening to her parent's nonsense, and he tried to assume a friendly, fatherly manner toward her, and failed. The girl made his blood burn and his hand shake on his horse's mane. His breath came short, his eyes grew bright, and only with difficulty did he arrest a frantic, reckless petition for a kiss at any cost. Perhaps such an abrupt and volcanic climax had been best; but he restrained himself, swallowed his ardour and became humble before her. Seeing that she preferred this attitude, he sank to servility; then, rating him for wasting his time and her own, she turned away hard by her cottage door, and he, without formal farewell, walked his horse onward all a-dreaming. Sarah, too, was not unmoved, but she hid her emotion and was glad that neither her mother's nor any other pair of eyes had seen her with young Chave.

Timothy met the third party to that unfolding drama as he proceeded on to the Moor. Then came

John Aggett with an anxious face looking out upon the world above his pale beard. The labourer stopped Tim, and in broken sentences — like a child that wrestles to describe new things within his experience but beyond his vocabulary — strove clumsily to express a mental upheaval which he lacked words to display. He made it clear, however, that he was in a great turmoil of mind and much driven by fear of appearances in connection with Gammer Gurney's predictions of the previous night.

"I be just come from speech with the old woman, and can't say as 'twas sense or yet nonsense I got out of her. She kept a close watch on her lips, 'peared to me; but her eyes threatened bad things an' her weern't at ease. 'What will happen, will happen,' she sez to me; an' at the fust utterance it seemed a deep sayin', yet, come to think on't, 'twas a thing known so well to me as she."

"Why did you go to her?" enquired Timothy, knowing without need of answer.

"'Bout last night. Couldn't banish it from my head what her said as to your sweetheart. So I went an' telled her how you met my Sarah an' axed if that comed in the spell, seein' the girl were tokened to another man. An' she said as it might be or might not be, because the spoken word remained an' was no more to be called back again than last year's primrosen. Then I axed her what

her view of it might be, an' she up an' said what I told 'e; 'What will happen, will happen.' Arter that I grew hot an' said any fule knowed so much, an' she turned round 'pon me like a dog you've trod on by mistake, an' her eyes glinted like shinin' steel, an' I reckoned she was gwaine to awverlook me theer an' then. So I cleared out of it."

"What happens, happens, because it must. That's all right enough, John. And things won't fall out differently because we take thought and pine about 'em."

"I be keepin' comp'ny, an' it may be a sort o' state as blinds the eyes," said Aggett, humbly. "I trust 'e in this thing—you'm a gen'leman, an' wiser'n me, as be a mere zawk for brains alongside you. But theer 'tis, she'm my awn maid, an' if the 'mazin' butivul looks of her have fired 'e, then, as you'm a gude man, so I pray you'll be at trouble not to see her no more. 'Tis very well to say what must fall, must; but the future did ought to be a man's sarvant, I reckon, not his master."

"That's not philosophic, John."

"Anyway, if theer's danger in my maid to you, then turn your back upon her. I sez it wi' all respects as man to master; an' as man to man, I'll say more, an' bid you be a man an' look any way but that. Ess fay, I sez it, though not worthy to hold a cancell to 'e. An' what's more, I trust 'e."

To Timothy's relief John did not delay for an answer to his exhortation, but proceeded upon his way. So they parted, by curious chance, at that spot where to-day there rise the mound and aged thorn. The Moor was of a uniform and sullen iron colour under a sky of like hue but paler shade. The north wind still blew, but the clouds were lower, denser and heavy with snow. Even as Aggett went down the hill and his rival proceeded upward, there came fluttering out of the grey the first scattered flakes of a long-delayed downfall. They floated singly, wide-scattered on the wind; others followed; here a monstrous fragment, undulating like a feather, capsized in the invisible currents of the air. Then the swarm thickened and hurried horizontally in puffs and handfuls. The clean black edges of the distant Moor were now swept and softened with a mist of falling snow; aloft, thicker and faster, came the flakes, huddling and leaping out of nothingness and appearing as dark grey specks against the lighter sky. Presently indication of change marked the world, and a glimmer of virgin white under on-coming gloom outlined sheep tracks and made ghostly the grey boulders of the Moor. By nightfall the great snow had fairly begun, and blinding blizzards were screaming over the Moor on the wings of a gale of wind.

CHAPTER V

BEFORE the snows melted and the first month of the new year had passed by, John Aggett and his master's son were friends no more.

Of Timothy it may be recorded that he fought fiercely, then with waning strength, and finally succumbed and lost his battle. By slow degrees his intimacy with Sarah grew. Neither sought the other; but love dragged them together. The man hid it from his small world, or fancied that he did so; the girl blushed in secret and knew that what she had mistaken for love was mere attachment — an emotion as far removed from her affection for Timothy as the bloodless moonbeams from the flush of a rosy sunrise. A time came, and that quickly, when she could deceive herself no longer, and she knew that her life hung on her lover, while the other man was no more than a sad cloud upon the horizon of the future.

Frosts temporarily retarded the thaw, and Timothy and Sarah walked together at evening time in a great pine wood. A footpath, ribbed and fretted with snakelike roots, extended here, and moving along it they sighed, while the breath of the great

trees bore their suspirations aloft into the scented silence. One band of orange light hung across the west and the evening star twinkled diamond-bright upon it, while perpendicularly against the splendour sprang the lines of pine trunks, dimmed aloft with network of broken and naked boughs, merging above into a sombre crown of accumulated foliage. Cushions of dead needles were crisp under foot and the whisper of growing ice tinkled on the ear.

"'Tis vain to lie — at least to you an' to myself. I love 'e, Tim; I love 'e wi' all my poor heart — all — all of it."

Her breath left her red lips in a little cloud and she hung her head hopelessly down.

"God can tell why such cruel things happen, dearest. Yet you loved him too — poor chap."

"Never. 'Tis the difference 'tween thinkin' an' knowin' — a difference wide as the Moor. I never knowed love; I never knowed as there was such a — but this be wicked talk. You've wonned the solemn truth out o' me; an' that must content 'e. I never could ax un to give me up — him so gude an' workin' that terrible hard to make a home for me."

"What will the home be when you've got it? Some might think it was better that one should suffer instead of two."

"I couldn't leave him, out of pity."

"You must think of yourself, too, Sarah — if not of me. I hate saying so, but when your life's salvation hangs on it, who can be dumb? John Aggett's a big-hearted, honest man; yet he hasn't our deep feelings; it isn't in him to tear his heart to tatters over one woman as I should."

"Us can't say what deeps a man may have got hid in him."

"Yes, but we can — in a great measure. John's not subtle. He's made of hard stuff and sensible stuff. I'll fathom him at any rate. It must be done. He shall know. God forgive me — and yet I don't blame myself very much. I was not free — never since you came into my life and filled it up to the brim. He saw the danger. I confess that. He warned me, an' I bade him fear nothing. I was strong in my own conceit. Then this happened. The thing is meant to be; I know it at the bottom of my being. It was planned at creation and we cannot alter it if we would."

"'Tis well to say that; but I reckon poor Jan thought the same?"

"I'll see him; I'll speak with him man to man. He must give you up. Oh, if I could change places with him and find myself a labourer just toiling to make a home for you, I'd thank the Lord on my knees!"

"I wish I'd never seen either of 'e, for I've awnly

made the both of 'e wretched men. Better I'd never drawed breath than bring this gert load of sorrow upon you an' him."

"You can't help it; you're innocent, and the punishment must not fall upon your shoulders. You love me better than Aggett; and that he must know in justice to himself — and us."

"Then his life be ruined an' his cup bitter for all time."

"I don't think so, Sarah. You misjudge him. And even if this must be so, it is only Fate. I will speak to him to-night."

"Leave it a little while. I'm fearful to trembling when I think of it. 'Tis I must tell him, not you. 'Tis I must tell him I'm not faithful an' beg for forgiveness from him. An' if he struck me down an' hurted me — if he killed me — I'd say 'twas awnly fair punishment."

"He never would lift a finger, even in his rage."

"Jan? Never — never. A fiery soul, but so soft-hearted as a li'l cheel. Ess fay, 'tis from me he should hear it, if he must."

"It would be better that I should do this."

Before they reached the stile, that stood under the great beech tree, each loving coward had prayed the other to leave the task alone; and finally both promised to do nothing for a short space. Then into the light they came, and Sarah, glancing upward, saw

dim letters and a lovers' knot like sad eyes staring from the tree trunk.

As a matter of fact, there existed no great need to impress the situation upon John Aggett. The man, if slow-witted, was not blind, and, indeed, agile enough of intellect where Sarah was concerned. For many days he had hesitated to read the change in her. His visits to her had been marked by gloomy fits of taciturnity, by short speeches, abrupt leave-takings, by distrust in his eyes, by rough mumbled sentences she could not catch, by outbursts of affection, by sudden hugs to his heart, by searching, silent scrutiny of her features and numberless reiterations of one question. He never wearied to hear her declare that she loved him; his only peace of mind was in the moments of that assurance daily repeated; and he approached to absolute subtlety in appraisal of Sarah's voice and vocal inflection as she made answer. Until the present, her affirmation of love had rung truly upon his ear; now he felt a shadow behind the words and steeled himself to the change. Her lips said one thing; her voice and eyes another. He grew slowly to believe the signs and to realise that she loved him no more, or if a little, so little that she did not mind lying to him.

Over this earthquake in his life he brooded bitterly enough, yet the stroke of it, upon first falling, was in some measure broken by his knowledge of

Timothy's interview with Gammer Gurney. A fatalistic resignation arose from this recollection and manifested itself, for the brief space of a week, in John's attitude to his fate. But as the nature of all he had lost and how he had lost it beat upon his brain, a great agony of reality soon caused him to brush the white witch and her predictions out of the argument; they were factors too trivial to determine the careers of men and women; and thus, from beneath the smoke of his brief apathy appeared a consuming fire, and the man's passionate nature cried for a speedy and definite end to his torments.

Work upon the land was suspended under frost; but from the great barn in Bellever Barton came daily a hurtling of flails where threshing of barley kept the hands busy for many hours in each brief day. The flails gleamed like shooting stars across the dusty atmosphere of the barn, and when the sunlight entered, a sort of delicate golden cloud hung in the air, only to sink slowly away upon cessation of labour. Timothy Chave, too, laboured here. For something to occupy him he swung a flail with the rest, and made the old hands think better of themselves and their skill within sight of his clumsy efforts. Then it happened that Aggett, awake to an opportunity, suddenly desisted from work, pulled on his coat and accosted his rival. But he spoke for Tim's ear alone and challenged no general attention.

"Set down your drashel an' come an' speak wi' me a minute t'other side the yard."

"Certainly, John, if you wish it."

A moment later the meeting that Sarah had dreaded came about; but the results of it were of a sort not to have been anticipated. Aggett went straight to the point of attack and his temper suffered from the outset before the more cultured man's attitude and command of words.

"You know full well what I've got to say before I sez it, I judge. I see in your face you know, Timothy Chave."

"Yes, I do. It's about Sarah. Things that must happen, must happen. I'm glad you've broached this subject, Aggett. Well, it stands thus; we are not our own masters always, unfortunately."

"You can say that an' look me in the face calm as a stone, arter what passed between us six weeks ago?"

"Six weeks — is that all?"

"Ess fay, though more like six years to me — six years o' raging, roasting hell. Why do 'e bide here? Why do 'e take walks along wi' she — skulking in the woods away from honest eyes like a fox? You've lied to me —"

"Don't speak quite so loud, John. I cannot help the past. It was not my doing. I never sought out Sarah. We are all tools in the hand of Fate or Providence, or whatever you like to call it; we are puppets

and must dance to the tune God is pleased to play. We're not free, any of us — not free to make promises or give undertakings. Doesn't this prove that we're slaves to a man? I love Sarah Belworthy with all my heart and soul. That is not a sin. There is nothing in the world for me but her. I'm frank enough to you now; and if I lied before, it was because I thought I could control what was to come. I tried to keep my word. I turned from her path many times. I begged to be allowed to go away from the Moor, but my father would not suffer me to change my mind again. I swear I did my best; but loving is another matter. I might as easily have promised not to breathe as not to love her."

"Words! An' her — an' me —?"

"It's cursedly hard. God knows I don't find it easy to answer you. But think: picture yourself in her place. Imagine that you found a woman you loved better than Sarah."

"'Tis allus lifting of the burden on to other folks' shoulders wi' you. I ban't agwaine to imagine vain things at your bidding. Dost hear me? I want the plain truth in plain speech. But that's more'n you could give me, I reckon. The question I've got to ax, my girl's got to answer. An' I call her 'my girl,' yet, until I hear from her awn lips she ban't my girl no more. Then — then — Christ knows what —"

"If there's any sort of satisfaction on earth, I'd

give it to you. I know better than you can tell me that I'm a weak man. And I've hated myself for many days when I thought of you; but there it is — a fact beyond any mending."

"Get out of her life, if you're honest, an' doan't whine to me 'bout things being beyond mendin'! Go! Turn your back on her an' let the dazzle of 'e fade out of her eyes an' out of her mind. You know so well as me, that it ban't beyond mendin'. She promised to marry me 'fore ever she seed the shadow of you; an' you knawed it from the fust moment you set eyes on her; an' yet you went on an' sinked from manhood into this. You'm a whole cowardice o' curs in the skin o' one man, damn you!"

"You do right to curse. You will never feel greater contempt for me than I do for myself. I cannot go away. It is impossible — wholly above my strength. And the position is beyond mending, despite what you say — both for Sarah and for me. It is no crime in her to love me; the fault is mine, and if I had sworn on my hope of salvation to you, I should have broken my oath as I did my promise. Measure my punishment — that is all you can do; and I won't flinch from it."

"She loves you — better'n what she do me? It's come to that; an' you ax me to measure your punishment! You pitiful wretch! You know you'm safe enough now. She loves you better'n me. Theer's

your safety. 'Struth! I could smash your bones like rotten wood, an' you know it; but she loves you better'n me; an' who be I to crack her painted china wi' my rough cloam? I doan't love her no less — anyways not so little as to bruise you, an' that you knowed afore you spoke. Get out o' my sight an' may worse fall on you than ever I would bring. May the thing you've done breed an' bite an' sap the heart out of 'e like a canker worm; may it bring thorns to your roses, an' death to your hopes, an' storms to your skies; may it fill your cup wi' gall an' bend your back afore your time an' sting you on your death-bed. May it do all that, an' more, so as you'll mind this hour an' know if I'd scatted your lying brains abroad an' killed 'e, 'twould have been kinder than to let you live!"

"I have deserved your hardest words; but forgive her — now that you yield her up; forgive her if ever you loved her, for the fault was none of hers."

"You can think for her, can 'e? You can stand between me an' her to shield her against the man as would have faced fire an' water an' all hell's delights for her ever since she was a li'l dinky maid! You ax me to forgive her — you? Christ A'mighty! she'm a lucky woman to have a man of your metal to stand up for her against me!"

"I didn't mean that, Aggett; only I feared —"

"Doan't I love her tu, you smooth-faced fule?"

Do 'e think one hair of her ban't so precious to me as to you? Do 'e think because she've took your poison I'm mazed tu? I've got to live my life wi'out her; I've got to bide all my days wi'out her — that's enough. But she'd have loved me still if she could. Ban't her sin that you poured magic in her cup; ban't her sin that she won't wear glass beads no more now she thinks she've found a strong o' di'monds."

"You're a better man than I am, John; you make me see what I've done; you make me wish I was dead."

"Liar! Don't prate no more to me. I hate the filthy sight of 'e, an' the sound of thy oily tongue. I'd swing for 'e to-morrow, an' keep my last breath to laugh with; but for she. Tell her — no, that I'll do myself. I'll tell her; an' no call for you to fear as your fine name will get any hard knocks. I'll never soil my mouth with it more arter to-day."

He departed, and the other, in misery and shame, stood and watched him return to the threshing-floor. Yet, as the unhappy spirit who has sacrificed his life to a drug and creeps through shame and contumely back and back to the poison, counting nothing as vital that does not separate him therefrom, so now the man felt that Sarah Belworthy was his own and told himself that his honour, his self-respect, his fair repute were well lost in exchange for this unexampled pearl.

CHAPTER VI

AT nightfall John Aggett visited the cottage of the Belworthys, but Sarah was from home for the day and he had a few words with her mother instead. That astute woman was well informed of affairs, and the romance now proceeding had long been the salt of her life, though she pretended no knowledge of it. In common with her husband, she hoped for glory from a possible union between the cot of Belworthy and the homestead of the Chaves. But these ambitions were carefully hidden from sight. All the smith said, when the matter was whispered, amounted to a pious hope that the Lord would look after his own — meaning Sarah; but presently it behooved both parents to stir in the matter, when they learned of the subsequent meeting between their daughter and John Aggett. A very unexpected determination on the girl's part resulted from that occasion, and the matter fell out in this way.

Before seeing John again, Sally had lengthy speech with her new sweetheart, and he, a little dead to the danger of so doing, detailed at length his conversation with the cowman and explained the complete nature of his rival's renunciation. This narrative set

Timothy in a somewhat sorry light, and the fact that he unconsciously bore himself as a victor added to the unpleasant impression conveyed. Had Tim declared his own sorrow and shame, blamed himself and acknowledged John's greatness with whole-hearted or even simulated praise, the girl had accepted the position more readily; but as it was, young Chave, whose fear of rousing her pity for John rendered him less eloquent upon that theme than he felt disposed to be, by this very reticence and oblivion touching the other's profound sorrow, awoke that pity he desired to stifle. Indeed, his story moved Sarah unutterably. While her love for Tim was the light of her life, yet at this juncture her nature forced her to turn to the first man, and now she held herself guilty of wickedness in her treatment of him. An instinct toward abstract justice, rare in women, uplifted her in this strait; the stricken man clung to her mind and would not be banished. Even before Timothy's subsequent abasement and self-accusations, she could not forget the past or live even for an hour in the joy of the present. The very note of triumph in her loved one's voice jarred upon her. It was, therefore, with feelings painfully mingled and heart distracted by many doubts that Sarah met John Aggett at last.

He was harsh enough — harsh to brutality — and for some subtle reason this attitude moved her to the

step he least expected. Softness and kind speech might have sent Sarah weeping to Timothy after all; but the ferocity, despair and distraction of the big flaxen man confirmed her in a contrary course of action. She put her hands into his, cried out that, before God, she was his woman for all time, and that his woman she would remain until the end. John Aggett strangled his reason upon this loving declaration — as many a stronger spirit would have done. He told himself that his gigantic love might well serve for them both; he caressed the wanderer in love and called upon Heaven to hear his thanksgivings. New rosy-fledged hope sprang and soared in his heart at this unhopèd blessing, and for a few blissful days light returned to his face, elasticity to his step. He had steeled his soul to part with her; he had told himself the worst of the agony was over, but in reality the girl had come back into his life again before the real grief of his loss had bitten itself into his mind. Now, despite the inner whisper that told him his joy rested on the most futile foundations possible, he took her back as he had resigned her — in a whirlwind of emotion. And he assured himself that, having once yielded her up, neither men nor God could reasonably ask him to do so again.

Mrs. Belworthy it was who first penetrated the false pretence and mockery of the new understanding. Upon the strength of that discovery she com-

municated in secret with Timothy Chave, and bade him cultivate patience and be of good cheer despite the darkness of appearances. Sarah, indeed, shewed by no sign that she desired to turn from her bargain again; but the emptiness and aridity of these renewed relations could not be hidden. Even John grasped the truth after a fortnight of hollow love-making. He tried to reawaken the old romance, to galvanise a new interest into the old hopes and plans; but Sarah's simulation too often broke down despite her best endeavours. Tears filled her eyes even while she clung most fiercely to him; her parents murmured their regrets that John should persist in ruining her life. Indeed, Mrs. Belworthy did more than murmur; she took an occasion to speak strongly to the cowman; yet he shut his eyes to the truth and blundered blindly on, straining every nerve and racking his brain to discover means whereby Sarah might be won back to the old simple ways, to her former humility of ambition and simplicity of thought. But any restoration of the past conditions was impossible, for her mind had much expanded in Timothy's keeping; and this fact did Aggett, by slow and bitter stages, at length receive and accept. With heart the sorer for his temporary flicker of renewed happiness, he tore himself from out a fool's paradise and abandoned hope and Sarah once for all.

"'Tis vain to make believe any more," he said to

her. "God knows you've tried your hardest, but you ban't built to throw dust in a body's eyes. Your bread's a-been leavened wi' tears these many days, an' your heart's in arms against the falling out of things. 'Tis natural as it should be so. We've tried to come together again an' failed. Us can do no more now."

"Leave 'e I won't; if you beat me away from 'e like a dog, like a dog I'll come back again."

"Leave me you must, Sally. I ban't gwaine to spoil your butivul life for all time wi' my love, though you come wi' open arms an' ax me to. Go to un free, an' take my solemn word as I'll rage against him no more. I'll know you'm happy then; an' that must be my happiness. I'll never forget you comed twice to me o' your own free will."

"You'm a gude man — a gert saintly man — an' God knows why I be so pitiful weak that anything born should have come between us, once I'd promised."

"Many things comes between the bee an' the butt, the cup an' the lip, men an' women folks an' their hopes o' happiness. Please God you'll fare happy wi' him."

"I don't deserve it, if theer's any justice in the sky."

"Theer ban't to my knowledge. Pray God He'll be gude to 'e — then I'll forgive the man. An' the

world won't come to me for his character whether or no."

She protested and wept; he was firm. For a little hour his lofty mood held and he completed the final act of renunciation before he slept. Knowing full well that Chave would never hear the truth from Sarah, he laid wait for him that night and met him in Postbridge at a late hour.

The men stood side by side in the empty, naked road that here crossed Dart by a pack-saddle bridge. The night was rough and cold but dry, and the wind wailing through naked beeches, the river rattling harshly over its granite bed, chimed in unison with the recent sorrow of Timothy's heart. When Sarah announced her determination, the youth had threatened self-destruction and foretold madness. Neither one thing nor the other happened, but he was sufficiently miserable and his sufferings had by no means grown blunted on this night as he plodded wearily through the village.

Aggett, moving out of the darkness, recognised his man and spoke.

"Come you here — on to the bridge," he said abruptly. "Theer us'll be out o' the way o' the world, an' can sit 'pon the stones an' I can say what's to say."

"There is nothing to talk about between us. If you knew how much I have suffered and am still suffering, you'd spare me more words."

"Aw jimmery! You'm a poor whinin' twoad — too slack-twisted for any full-grown woman, I should have reckoned. But your luck be in. She comed back to me for duty; now she'm gwaine back to you for love."

"Does she know her own mind, John?"

"Ess fay, an' allus did arter you come."

Now Aggett briefly explained the events of the past fortnight and his own determination concerning Sarah, while the younger man felt his blood wake from its sleep and race again through his veins. His treasure had not been lost and life was worth living yet. He had tact sufficient to make no comments upon the story. He spared John Aggett many words. But he gazed once or twice at the other's heaving breast and wild eyes and told himself that the cowman was a being altogether beyond his power to understand. Then he crept away as quickly as he could and did not sleep until he had spoken with Sarah. On this occasion his account of events was framed in words of most meek and humble sort. He awarded Aggett full measure of praise, while upon himself he heaped sufficient obloquy, feeling that he could very well afford to do so as a price for this return to paradise.

CHAPTER VII

Now thundered upon John Aggett the full flood of his griefs at highest water-mark. Until this time hopes had alternated with fears, possibilities of recovered joy with the thought of utter loss. Then he had possessed Sarah's promises and the consciousness that in his hands, not another's, lay the future. But now John had departed out of her life for good and all, and the great act of self-renunciation was complete. To the highest-minded and noblest soul something in the nature of anti-climax must have followed upon this action. That one capable of so great a deed and such unselfish love possessed ample reserves of self-command and self-control to live his life henceforward on the same high plane by no means followed. Having by his own act insured the highest good for the woman he loved, John Aggett's subsequent display sank far below that standard and indeed embraced a rule of life inferior to his usual conduct. A supreme unconcern as to what might now await him characterised his actions. As a lighthouse lamp illuminates some horror of sea and stone, so his notable deed shone in a sorry set-

ting, for John Aggett's existence now sank as much below its usual level of indifferent goodness as his relinquishment of Sarah Belworthy, for love of her, had risen above it. Until the present his attachment to the girl and hope of happiness had made him a hard-working man, and since his engagement he had laboured with the patience of a beast and counted weariness a delight as the shillings in his savings-box increased. Now incentive to further work was withdrawn, he abated his energies, lacking wit to realise that upon sustained toil and ceaseless mental occupation his salvation might depend. His final departure from Bellever Barton was brought about as the result of a curious interview with his master.

To Farmer Chave, young Timothy, now reëstablished with Sarah, had come to break the news of his betrothal. But no parental congratulation rewarded the announcement. Mr. Chave knew every man and woman in Postbridge, and was familiar with the fact that the blacksmith's daughter had long been engaged to his cowman. That his son and heir should favour a labourer's sweetheart was a galling discovery and provoked language of a sort seldom heard even in those plain-speaking times. Finally the father dismissed his son, bade him get out of sight and conquer his calf-love once and for all or hold himself disinherited. A little later he acted on

his own shrewd judgement and held converse with Sarah's original suitor.

John was milking as the farmer entered his cow-yard, and a flood of sunlight slanted over the low byre roofs and made the coats of the cattle shine ripe chestnut red.

"Evenin' to 'e, Aggett. Leave that job an' come an' have a tell wi' me. I wants to speak to 'e."

"Evenin', maister. I'll milk 'Prim' dry, 'cause she do awnly give down to me. Milly can do t'others."

Farmer Chave waited until the cow "Prim" had yielded her store, then he led the way to an empty cow-stall — dark, cool and scented by its inhabitants. Across the threshold fell a bar of light; without, a vast heap of rich ordure sent forth delicate sun-tinted vapour; close at hand the cows stood waiting each her turn, and one with greatly distended udder lowed to the milkmaid.

"Look you here, Jan Aggett, you'm for marryin', ban't 'e? Didn't you tell me when I took you on as a you was keepin' company wi' blacksmith's purty darter?"

"'Twas so, then."

"Well, I'm one as likes to see my hands married an' settled an' getting childer 'cordin' to Bible command. What's your wages this minute?"

"You'm on a wrong tack, maister. Sarah Bel-

worthy an' me be out. Theer's nought betwixt us more."

Mr. Chave affected great indignation at this statement.

"Struth! Be you that sort?"

John reflected a moment before answering. He suspected his master must know the truth, but could not feel certain, for Mr. Chave's manner suggested absolute ignorance.

"Us changed our minds — that's all."

"You say so! When a girl changes her mind theer's generally another string to her bow. Either that, or she's tired of waiting for the fust."

"It might be 'twas so," said John, falling into the trap laid for him. "A maid like her can't be expected in reason to bide till such as me can make a home for her. I doan't blame her."

"Well, if that's the trouble, you can go right along to her this night an' tell her theer's no cause to keep single after Eastertide. Yeo and his wife do leave my cottage in Longley Bottom come then, an' instead of raisin' your wages as I meant to do bimebye, I'll give 'e the cot rent free. A tidy li'l place tu, I warn 'e, wi' best part of an acre o' ground, an' only half a mile from the village. Now be off with 'e an' tell the girl."

Aggett gasped and his eyes dimmed a moment before the splendid vision of what might have been.

It took him long to find words and breath to utter them. Then he endeavoured to explain.

"You'm a kind maister, God knows, an' I'd thank 'e year in an' year out wi' the sweat o' my body for such gudeness. But the thing can't be, worse luck. Best I tell 'e straight. 'Tis like this: Sally have met another chap — a chap built o' softer mud than what I be. An' he'm more to her than me, an' —"

"God A'mighty! An' you stand theer whining wi' no more spirit than a auld woman what's lost her shoe-string! A chap hath kindiddled the maid from 'e? Another man hath stole her? Is that what you mean?"

John grew fiery red, breathed hard and rubbed his chin with a huge fist.

"Ban't the man I cares a curse for. 'Tis the girl."

"Rubbishy auld nonsense! 'Tis woman's play to show 'e the worth of her. They'm built that way an' think no man can value 'em right unless he sees they'm for other markets so well as his. Do 'e know what that vixen wants 'e to do? Why, she's awnly waiting for 'e to give t'other chap a damn gude hiding! Then she'll cuddle round again — like a cat arter fish. I know 'em!"

John's jaw dropped before this sensational advice. Now he was more than ever convinced that his master knew nothing of the truth. It appeared to him

the most fantastic irony that a father should thus in ignorance condemn his son to such a sentence. Then Aggett put a question that shewed quickening of perception.

"If 'twas your own flesh an' blood, what would 'e say?"

"Same as I be sayin' now. Burned if I'd blame any man for sticking to his own."

"It be your son," declared John, shortly.

"I know it," answered the other. "That's why I'm here. You'm not the fule you look, Jan, an' you know so well as I can tell 'e this match ban't seemly nohow. I ban't agwaine to have it — not if the Lard Bishop axed me. An' I tell you plain an' plump — me being your master — that you must stop it. The girl's your girl, an' you must keep her to her bargain. An' you won't repent it neither. Marry her out of hand an' look to me for the rest. An' if a word's said, send him as sez it to me. I'll soon shut their mouths."

"Ban't the folks — 'tis her. She do love your son wi' all her heart an' soul — an' he loves her — onless he's a liar."

"Drivel! What does he know about love — a moon-blind calf like him? I won't have it, I tell 'e. He's gone his awn way tu long! Spoiled by his fule of a mother from the church-vamp¹ onward till he've

¹ *Church-vamp*. Font.

come to this bit of folly. It's not to be — dost hear what I say?"

"I hear. Go your ways, maister, an' prevent it if you can. I'll not meddle or make in the matter. Sally Belworthy have chosen, an' ban't me as can force her to change her mind."

"More fule her. An' between the pair of 'e, she'll find herself in the dirt. 'Tis in a nutshell. Will 'e take the cottage an' make her marry you? I lay you could if you was masterful."

"Never — ban't a fair thing to ax a man."

"Best hear me through 'fore you sez it. If you'm against me in this, you can go to hell for all I care. If you won't help me to keep my son from disgracing me an' mine, you'm no true man, an' I doan't want 'e any more to Bellever Farm. 'Tis a wife an' a home rent free 'pon wan side, an' the sack on the other. So you'd best to make choice."

"I'll go Saturday."

"Of all the ninnyhammers ever I saw! You gert yellow-headed cake, can't you see you'm spoilin' your awn life? Or was it that t'other side offered 'e better terms? If that's so, you won't get 'em, because Tim Chave'll be a pauper man the day he marries wi'out my leave."

The farmer stormed awhile longer, but presently he stamped off and Aggett returned to his mother. Then, as he had angered Mr. Chave, so did his own

parent enrage him. She protested at his folly, and implored him to carry out his master's wish while opportunity remained to do so. He was strong against it until the old woman went on her knees to him and wept. Then he lost his temper and cursed the whole earth and all thereon for a cruel tangle that passed the understanding of man to unravel.

Later in the evening he revisited the village and before ten o'clock returned intoxicated to his home.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM that day forward John Aggett exhibited a spectacle of reckless indifference to circumstances and a manner of life lightened only by occasional returns to sobriety and self-command. As to how it fared with Timothy and Sarah he cared not. Others ceased to speak of the matter in his presence, and thus it happened that he went in ignorance of events for the space of five weeks. During that period he loafed at the "Green Man" Inn until his money was spent, then returned to dwell with his mother.

Meantime Timothy Chave's romance was prospering ill, despite his rival's endeavour to make the way easy. Other obstacles now confronted him, and though Sarah was happy and well content to live in the delight of each hour with her lover, Tim found delay less easily borne and struggled to change Mr. Chave's attitude toward his desires. But it proved useless, and the young man chafed in vain. He assured Sarah that his father was merely an obstinate elder and would surely be won to reason in good time; but the full significance of her engagement with Timothy, as his father viewed it, she did

not know and never would have heard from Tim's lips. There happened, however, an accidental meeting between Sarah and Farmer Chave himself, and this brushed all mystery or doubt from the girl's mind, opened her eyes to the gravity of Tim's actions and left her face to face with the truth.

One day Sarah, on foot, with her face set homeward, observed Farmer Chave riding back from Widecombe to Postbridge on a big bay horse. He saw her, too, eyed her narrowly and slackened speed, while she wished the road might open and swallow her from his sight. But there was no escape, so she curtsied and wished Mr. Chave a very good evening. He returned the salute and seeing, as he believed, a possibility of setting all right on the spot by one great master-stroke, attempted the same.

"Ah, my girl, Belworthy's darter, ban't 'e? A peart maid an' well thought on, I doubt not. Be you gwaine home-along?"

Sarah's heart fluttered at this genial salutation.

"Ess, maister," she said.

"Then I'll lighten your journey. I haven't got the double saddle, but you'm awnly a featherweight an' can ride pillion behind me an' save your shoes."

The mode of travel he suggested was common enough in those days, but such a proposal from Tim's father frightened Sarah not a little. Her first thought was for herself, her second for her

sweetheart, and she nerved herself to refuse the farmer's offer.

"I'm sure you'm very kind, sir, but —"

"No 'buts.' Here's a stone will make a splendid upping stock, an' 'Sharky' can carry the pair of us without knowing his load be increased. Up you get! Theer's plenty of room for my fardels in front o' the pommel. Us won't bate our pace for you, I promise. Now jump! Whoa, bwoy! Theer we are. Just put your arms around my flannel waistcoat an' doan't be shy. 'Tis well I met 'e, come to think on't, for I wanted a matter o' few words."

Soon they jogged forward, the big horse taking little account of Sarah's extra weight. At length they crossed Riddon Ridge and passed Dart at a ford, where Sarah had to hold up her toes out of the reach of the river. Then, as they rode along the foothills of Bellever, the farmer spoke suddenly.

"My life's been wisht of late days along wi' taking thought for my son Tim. You've heard tell of un? You see, 'tis my wish to have un mated wi' his cousin. But I'm led to onderstand as theer's a maiden up-long he thinks he likes better; an' her name's same as yours, Sarah Belworthy."

"Oh, Maister Chave, I do love un very dear, I do."

"So you done to that yellow man, Jan Aggett."

"'Tweern't the same. When Maister Timothy comed, I seed differ'nt."

"Doan't shake an' tremble. You'll never have no reason to fear me. Tell me how 'twas. Jan gived 'e up — eh?"

"Ess, he did."

"Why for?"

"For love of me."

"Ah! Now that was a brave fashion deed. I allus thought a lot of the man, an' I'm sorry you've sent un to the Devil, wheer they tell me he's bound of late days."

"He'm a gude man, an' I wish to God as something could be done to bring him back in the right road."

"Ess fay! An' you'm the one as would have to look the shortest distance to find a way to do it, Sarah. A' gude example that man, for all his foolishness since. Loved 'e well enough to leave 'e — for your own gude, he did — eh?"

"God bless him for doin' it."

"Why doan't 'e go back to him?"

"I cannot, I cannot now."

"Well, man's love be greater than woman's by the look of it. What girl would have done same as that man done? What girl would give up a man for love of him, an' even leave un for his gude? Not one as ever I heard tell of."

"Many an' many would for that matter. What's a sacrifice if your love be big enough?"

"Be yours? That's the question I'd ax 'e."

Sarah's heart sank low; Mr. Chave felt her shiver and the hands clasped over his thick waistcoat tremble. Looking down, he saw her fingers peeping out of woollen mittens; and upon one, sacred to the ring, a small gold hoop appeared with a coral bead set therein.

Sarah did not answer the last pointed question, and Farmer Chave continued:—

"I know you've promised to be wife to my son some day, an' I know he've taken partickler gude care to hide from you my view of the question. But you must hear it, for your awn sake as well as his an' mine. I've nothin' against you, Sarah, nothin', an' less than nothin', for I like you well an' wish to see you so gude as you'm purty an' so happy as you'm gude; but I know my son for a lad of light purposes an' weak will an' wrong ambitions. Ban't enough iron in un; an' the maid I'm set on for un have got a plenty backbone to make up for his lack. Her he's to wed in fulness o' time, if I've any voice left in affairs; an' if he doan't, 'tis gude-bye to Bellever for him, an' gude-bye to more'n that. So theer he stands, Sarah, an' you'd best to hear what it means. Maybe you thought you was makin' choice between a labourin' man an' a gentleman, between a pauper an' a young chap wi' his pockets full o' money. But ban't so, I assure 'e. 'Tis the gentleman'll be the

pauper if he marries you; but John Aggett — why, I offered un my cottage in Longley Bottom free o' rent from the day as your banns was axed in marriage wi' un to Widecombe Church! That's the man as gived 'e up for love of 'e. An' ban't you so strong as him?"

"Tu gude he was — tu gude for the likes o' me."

"Well, as to t'other, though he's my son, blamed if I think he's gude enough. But that's neither here nor theer. The question ban't what sort of love he's got for you; but what sort you've got for him. Do 'e follow my meanin'? I doan't storm or rave, you see — tu wise for that. I only bid you think serious whether your feeling for Timothy's the sort to ruin him, or to save him from ruin. 'Tis a hard choice for 'e, but we'm all faaced wi' ugly puzzles 'pon the crossways o' life. Now you know my 'pinions, you'll do what's right, or you'm not the girl I think 'e."

"I must give un up for all time?"

"Best not put it that way. Doan't drag my rascal of a bwoy in the argeyment. Say to yourself, 'I must mate him as I promised to mate — him that's wastin' his life an' gwaine all wrong for love o' me.' 'Tis plain duty, woman, looked at right. Not that I'd rob 'e of the pleasure of knowin' you'd done a gert deed if you gived Tim up; but t'other's the man as you've got to think of; an', if you do

this gude thing, 'tis just similar as he done for you. Wi' Jan Aggett be your happiness wrapped up, if you could see it. An' Jan's much more like to go well in marriage harness than my son be, or I doan't know carater."

"I'll try, I'll try. It's more than I've heart or strength for, but I'll try, Maister Chave. I'll try to do right by both of them."

"Who could say fairer? An' here's the lane to blacksmith's, so I'll drop 'e. An' give your faither my respects an' tell un I want un to-morrow to the farm."

After Sarah had dismounted the farmer spoke again.

"Take to heart what I've said to 'e, an' remember that to please me won't be a bad action from a worldly side. Go back to Jan Aggett, Sarah Belworthy; that's my advice to you, an' angels from heaven couldn't give 'e no better, 'cause theer ban't room for two 'pinions. Now let me hear what metal you'm made of, an' that afore the week be out. So gude night."

The man trotted off with knees stiff and elbows at right angles to his body; the girl entered her home; and that night, tossing and turning wearily, thrice she decided to give up her lover and thrice determined to take no definite step until she had again seen and spoken with Timothy. But her heart told her that such a course was of all the weak-

est. Presently she assured herself that many plans might be pursued and that wide choice of action lay before her. Then John Aggett chiefly occupied her thoughts. To go back to him now appeared absolutely impossible. He had given her up, at a cost even she but dimly guessed, and to return into his troubled life again struck her as a deed beyond measure difficult and dangerous.

Long she reflected miserably on the sorrow of her lot; then, in the small hours of morning and upon the threshold of sleep, Sarah determined to let another judge of her right course of conduct and dictate it to her.

“’Twas the white witch, Gammer Gurney, as foretold Tim would marry me that terrible night,” she thought. “Then ’tis for she to say what I should do an’ what I shouldn’t do. If ’tis ordained by higher things than men-folk as I’m to have Tim, what’s the use o’ weeping ’cause Farmer Chave wishes differ’nt?”

There was a sort of comfort in this philosophy; but her grey eyes closed upon a wet pillow as she slept, to wake with sudden starts and twitches from visions in great aisles of gloom, from dim knowledge of horrors hidden behind storm-clouds, from the murmur of remote callings and threatenings and cries of woe, from all-embracing dread begotten of a heavy heart, and an outlook wholly dreary and desolate.

CHAPTER IX

WITH morning light Sarah's decision to visit Gammer Gurney was still strong in her, and she determined to call upon the white witch before another nightfall. It was this enterprise that precipitated affairs and brought their end within sight.

Upon the evening that saw Sarah riding pillion with Farmer Chave, John Aggett had met the curate of Postbridge — one Reverend Cosmo Hawkes. The parson, who was a keen sportsman, came across John upon the Moor and improved his occasion to such good purpose that Aggett's ears tingled before the man of God had done with him. They returned together, and on the way home Mr. Hawkes, with admirable pertinacity, so hammered and pounded the erring labourer, that he alarmed him into frank regret for his evil ways. The reckless and unhappy young man was steadied by his minister's forcible description of what most surely awaits all evil livers; and when Mr. Hawkes, striking while the iron was hot, undertook to get Aggett good and enduring work at Ashburton, John promised to comply and to reform his bad courses from that day forth. The decision come to, he spent his last hours of free-

dom in folly. That night he drank hard, and when deep measures had loosened his tongue, explained to numerous "Green Man" gossips the thing he proposed to do. Afterward, when the overdose of drink in him had turned to poison, hope died again and his mother, listening fearfully at his door, heard him muttering and cursing and growling of death as the only friend left to him. In the morning he was oppressed by the immediate prospect of breathing the same air with Sarah Belworthy no more. He alternated between savage indifference and stubborn fatalism. In the first mood he was minded to depart at once; in the second he felt disposed to seek out Tim Chave and let the brute in him have its fling. He itched for batterings in the flesh. But he visited Postbridge, obtained the letter of introduction from Mr. Hawkes, and then seriously set himself to the task of preparing for departure. He told his mother that he would return within a fortnight, and she rejoiced, feeling his temporary absence a light evil as compared with his present life. But the truth, that he was leaving home not to return, she never suspected. All preliminary matters arranged, John Aggett bade farewell, lifted his bundle and set out, after an early dinner, for Ashburton, and as he passed Sarah Belworthy's home and saw the straggling village of Postbridge sink into the naked web of the woods, a

dark inclination mastered him again and passions that craved outlet in violence clouded down stormily upon his soul. But resolutely he carried his turmoil of thoughts along at the rate of four miles an hour, and quickly passing beside the river southward, approached Yar Tor and the road to Ashburton. Then, as there appeared the spectacle of Gammer Gurney's cottage, standing in its innocent humility and forlorn loneliness upon the Moor edge, John observed a woman ahead of him and realised that the last familiar face his eyes would rest upon must be Sarah Belworthy's. Guessing her errand, he slackened his pace that she might reach the cottage and disappear without knowledge of his presence; but as he walked more slowly, so did Sarah, though quite unconscious of the fact her old lover was at hand; and presently, to his astonishment, the girl stopped altogether, hesitated, and sat down by the wayside on a boulder. A determination not to avoid her now influenced Aggett. He approached, and, as he reached her and stood still, Sarah grew very pale and shewed some fear.

"You, Jan! An' settin' forth 'pon a journey by the look of it. Wheer be gwaine?"

"Out of this, anyway."

"For long?"

"Can't say as to that. I ban't myself of late days — not my own man as I used to be. God

knows wheer my changed temper's like to drive me in the end."

"'Tis the same with me, Jan. I doan't know my duty no clearer now than afore. I'm torn to pieces one way an' another, an' theer won't be much left o' me worth any man's love come bimebye. Sometimes I think I'll run right away next giglet-market¹ to Okehampton, come Our Lady's Day, an' hire myself out to the fust as axes, an' never set eyes on this place more."

"Ban't 'e happy yet, then? What more do 'e want?"

"My love's a curse wheer it falls. I loved 'e an' brought 'e to bad ways; an' Tim — I've set his nearest an' dearest against un. I seed Farmer Chave essterday, an' he urged me by the Book to give un up."

"'Struth! He said that, did he? But you didn't fall in wi' it, I reckon, else you wouldn't be here now?"

"'Tis all tu difficult for the likes o' me. What's a poor maiden to do? If I takes Tim, he'll be a ruined man, 'cordin' to his father."

"'Twas a mean, cowardly trick to threaten 'e."

"But plain truth — I could see that. A terrible tantara theer'll be in Bellever if he braves the anger

¹ *Giglet-market*. A hiring fair for domestic servants, held in times past at Okehampton and elsewhere in the West.

of Farmer. I've prayed an' prayed — Lard He knows how I've prayed — 'pon it, but — ”

“Prayers won't help 'e; leastways, they didn't me. I've lifted up far-reachin' prayers in my time, I promise you, Sarah, — the best I could; but never no answer, — never so much as a Voice in the night to help a chap.”

“You done right to pray an' you was led right, though you didn't know it. An' you'm well thought of for what you've done still, despite your fallin' away arterward.”

“Never mind 'bout me. I be gwaine far ways off, an' so like's not us'll never set eyes 'pon each other more. For me, I'd so soon end all as not. But for mother I should have got out of it afore now, for I ban't feared o' dyin', an' would go out o' hand this minute. But you? Can't the man help 'e? Do he know your fix? What the devil be he made of? Sugar?”

“He doan't know yet that I've spoken wi' his faither. An' he've been careful to hide that his folks was against me. I s'pose 'tis natural they should be so.”

“Ess — not knowin' you.”

“An' in my gert quandary I was gwaine in to Mother Gurney here. She's juggled wi' my life afore, seemin'ly, an' if any knows what's to be the end of it, 'tis her, I should think. I want to hear

what's right an' proper. I'm so weary of my days as you. Life an' love be gall-bitter this way. Oh, Jan, can't 'e say nought to comfort me? 'Tis more'n I can bear."

She was hysterical, and he flung down his bundle and sat beside her and tried to bring some peace to her spirit. His heart was full for her and he spoke eagerly. Then he saw the gold and coral on her finger and stopped talking and put his elbows on his knees and his big sandy head down on his hands.

"'Twas what you done, 'twas same as what you done," she said. "You left me for love of me; why can't I leave Tim for love of him?"

"'Tis axin' a woman tu much."

A long silence reigned. Wind-blown ponies stamped and snorted close at hand, and from a window in the neighbouring cottage a sharp eye watched the man and woman. Gammer was counting the chances of a customer, possibly two.

Fired with a glimmer of the hope that can never perish while the maid is free, John Aggett argued the advantages of obedience to Farmer Chave. He felt himself base in this, but Sarah was under his eyes, within reach of his arm. Her hot tears were on his hand.

"'Tis for you I be thinkin', though you might say 'twas two words for myself an' but one for you.

I wants your sorrow turned into joy, Sally, if it's a thing can be done. Leave me out — theer — now I'm not thinkin' for myself at all. Leave me out, an' leave him out, an' bide a maid till the right man finds 'e. I lay he haven't crossed your path yet. Give young Chave up for your own sake, if not his, an' look life in the face again free."

He continued fitfully in this strain, quenching his own dim hope remorselessly as he spoke, and she, hearing little save the drone of his voice, occupied herself with her own thoughts. Her emotions toward John Aggett had never much changed. Her love for Tim, being a feeling of different quality, had left her temperate if sincere regard for John unmoved. Possibly his own action in the past had rendered her more kindly disposed to him than before. There certainly existed in her mind a homespun, drab regard for him, and circumstances had not changed it.

Now as he strengthened her determination to give up her lover for her lover's good, and despite the bitterness of her spirit before the sacrifice, she could find some room in her mind for the man before her. To-day the presence of Sarah awoke the finest note in John. His first dim hope was extinguished; he soared above it, resolutely banished any personal interest in the problem now to be solved, and assumed that Sarah had similarly oblit-

erated him from all considerations of the future. But it was not so.

Presently the girl declared her mind to be made up and promised that she would break off her engagement. For a moment the other showed hearty satisfaction, then his forehead grew wrinkled.

"One thing mind," he said. "My name must not crop up no more in this. Ban't that I fear anything man can do, but theer'll be no weight to what you sez onless you make it clear 'tis your own thought. 'Tis you I care about — an' 'tis him you care about. I be gude as gone a'ready. 'Twas mere chance throwed us together, an' none need know 'bout it."

She was silent awhile, then put her hand out to him.

"I do owe you more'n ever a maid owed a man, I reckon."

He took and held the hand extended.

"You cannot help what's past and gone. Just call me home to your mind now an' again — that's all I ax 'e. Now I must be movin', for I've got long ways to go to-day."

Even in her misery she took a mournful pleasure in her power to command.

"Sit down an' bide till I bid you go," she said.

He obeyed, resumed the seat from which he had risen and tied and untied his bundle, but did not speak.

"If us could call back a year an' begin livin' all over again, Jan."

He looked down at her, puzzled.

"A man would give his soul to go back a bit sometimes; but that's about the awnly thing God A'mighty's self can't do, I reckon. 'Tis more'n His power to give back essterday."

"He can do it His own way. He can help us poor unhappy creatures to forget."

"So can a pint of old ale; not but them around about a man mostly looks to it that the raw of sorrow shan't heal tu quick for want of callin' to mind."

"Jan, I'm gwaine to give him up. I have given him up for all time. I shall allus love him, Jan, because I must. But that is all. An' you — you mustn't go out into the world an' wander 'pon the airth an' maybe never come home no more through fault of mine. Ban't fair as two men should break theer hearts an' have theer days ruined for one worthless woman. What I am, I am; what I felt for you, Jan, I feel — no more, no less. 'Tisn't I loved you less than I always did, but him more. If 'tis unmaidenly so to say, rebuke me, Jan."

Thus she deliberately came into his life again for the third time, and he was overwhelmed. And yet his answer was one of almost savage fierceness. Joy shook him, too, — a sort of incredulous joy, as when one dreams rare things, yet knows that one dreams.

The mingled emotions of the time upset his self-control, induced a sort of tense excitation and rendered his voice indistinct, hollow, mumbling as that of a man drunken or cleft in palate.

"That! That! You say that to me — arter all these long, long days! To come back now! God in Heaven, what a puppet dance 'tis! Now here, now theer — be your heart so light as thistledown? I doan't know wheer I stand; I'm mazed as a sheep this minute. An' you'd come back to me now?"

' "I would, Jan. I will."

"An' live man an' wife to the li'l lew cot offered us by the gudeness of Farmer?"

"No, not that. I couldn't do that. You've a heart soft enough to understand. I'll go with 'e, wheer you be gwaine — ay, this very day I will. But I can't bide here. I must get away from — from mother, an' faither, an' all. Then us can send a packet to 'em from far off. Anywheer but Post-bridge, Jan."

"You'm in honest, sober, Bible earnest, Sarah?"

"God's my witness, I be."

"Then He's my witness, tu, that I stand here a new man — an' not shamed o' the crumbs from t'other's table. You to come back! 'Tis more'n my deserts — such a drunken swine as I've been since —"

He paused a moment, then his manner changed

suddenly and he gripped the girl's arm so hard and glared so wildly that Gammer Gurney from her window feared a serious quarrel and nearly rushed out to separate them.

"Mind this, then," he said, with harsh intensity. "Mind this, now; you'm my whole life again, — body, an' bones, an' blood, an' soul, — from this moment onwards. Theer's gwaine to be no more changing now — no more altering your mind — or, by Christ, I won't answer for myself. I ban't so strong o' will as I was, an' since you've comed to me of your own free will, mine you'll be till death ends it; an' Lard help them as try to keep us apart now. Lard help 'em an' deliver 'em from me. You've come, an' I trust 'e — trust 'e same as I trust the sun to rise. But if you throw me over again, I'll — No matter to speak on that. Awnly I'll be true as steel to 'e; an' you must play your part an' look over your shoulder no more. You've spoke out o' your heart, me out o' mine; so let it be."

She was alarmed at this outburst, uttered with almost brutal energy and in loud accents. But it served its purpose and impressed her vacillating spirit with the impossibility of any further changes.

"We've been up an' down, him an' me, full long enough," continued Aggett. "Now, thanks be to a just God as I'd nearly forgot, you've come back to me an' I could crow like a marnin' cock to think

it. An' now what'll please 'e to do? Will 'e come along o' me this minute?"

"Ess — no — not now; but to-night I might. I must go home an' put together a few things an' pack up others. I can send along to home for my li'l box later."

"To-night, then. An', come next Sunday, us'll be axed out in church at Ashburton straightway. Come to think, 'twould be better for you to bide along wi' your folk until I be ready for 'e a week or two hence."

"No — I —" She was going to confess that she could not trust herself, but feared his eyes.

"Why for not?"

"I won't stop here without you. I'll come. They can hear the truth after I have gone."

"To-night, then," he said.

"Wheer shall I meet 'e to?"

"By the beech — you know. Through the woods be the nearest road for us. To the gert beech, wheer I set our letters in a love knot. No better place. Theer I'll come, an' theer I'll count to see 'e when the moon rises over the hill. An' doan't 'e keep me waitin' — not a moment, not the atom of a moment! I've gone through enough, an' my brain spins yet to think o' the past. Suffer more I can't — no more at all. You'll be sorry to your dying day if you'm late. Better never come than that. My head be

full o' strange things at this wonnerful happy happening, — strange things, — but I'll say no more than bid you be to the beech by moon-rise, if 'tis true that you love me an' not false. Be theer — or you'll awnly repent it once, Sarah, an' that's so long as you do live arter."

He exhibited little love now and less tenderness. It almost appeared that a mind long familiar with darkness was unable to accept and understand the light suddenly shed upon it. A note of impending catastrophe sounded in his words, seemed shadowed in his wild eyes.

"You fright me," said Sarah. "You doan't take me as I hoped you would. You ban't your old self, yet. How should you be for that matter? 'Tis only poor second-hand goods I'm bringing to 'e."

"Not so. 'Tis what I had first promise of. I'll be all a man can be to 'e — all I should be. Forgive me for harsh words; but I be dazed wi' this gert come-along-o'-it. I've been sore let for many days, an' 'twill take time to make me see wi' the old eyes when the brains in my head grow sweet an' cool again, an' the poison works out of 'em."

They talked a little while longer, then the white witch from her chamber window saw them turn and together retrace their steps.

CHAPTER X

THAT highest hope, long abandoned, should thus suddenly return within his reach, staggered John Aggett, and went far to upset the man's mental equilibrium. Indeed, it had been but a little exaggeration to describe his mind as, for the time, unhinged. The splendour of his changed position dazed him. Joy and bewilderment strove for mastery, and from a medley of poignant sensations was bred the passionate desire of possession, and a wild hunger to secure for his own what had been withheld so long.

Sarah Belworthy, for her part, experienced great turbulence of conflicting fears. Her mind was fixed, yet had something in it of absolute terror, as she reflected upon the recent interview. She had offered herself to him as a sudden inspiration; and now, retracing that fevered scene, John Aggett's frenzy of demeanour alarmed her much, for it was a revelation of the man she had not encountered until then. Presently an answer came to her puzzled mind — a solution of a sort that made the blood surge hotly to Sarah's face. Could it be that she had offered herself where she was wanted no more?

Had John's chivalry alone been responsible for his ready undertaking to receive her back? She nearly screamed in the silence of her little chamber at this thought; she desisted from her labour of preparation and flung herself upon her bed in secret shame. But reason quickly banished the fear. She remembered the man's intoxication of joy, his delirious thanksgiving. She felt her bosom sore where he had hugged her to himself and praised the God of Justice. Next she retraced his subsequent display of passion, his extravagant utterances and threats. She realized very fully that he held the pending crisis as one of vital magnitude and knew that he was strung to a pitch far beyond any that previous experience of him had exhibited or revealed to her. She determined to give him no cause for further excitement and so returned to her work, wondering the while what this ingredient of fear might be that had entered into her emotions concerning him.

Anon her thoughts passed to the other man, and the last struggle began. For his own salvation she was leaving him, but with natural human weakness she much desired that he should know of her great sacrifice in the time to come. That Timothy should pursue his life in ignorance of the truth after she had departed was a terrible thought to Sarah; but, since to see him again appeared out of the question, there remained a possibility that he would deem her

faithless and worthless to the end. She knelt and prayed that the nature of the thing she had done might be revealed to him in fulness of time; and then her mind grew active in another direction and she marvelled why she had thrown herself back into her first lover's arms and not taken his advice to remain free of both. Her feelings toward Aggett eluded all possibility of analysis or understanding. She fled from them to the task of setting her small possessions in order and packing her basket for the forthcoming departure.

Sarah could not write, and she was unable therefore to leave any message for her parents. Their anxiety must endure for the space of a day and night, but might then be allayed. She pictured herself dictating a letter to the scrivener at Ashburton, and wondered what she should put in it.

As the time approached and the day died, the vision of Timothy grew clearer and more clear. She saw his grief and indignation, his sorrow and dismay; she knew every line in his face which would contract, every furrow that would be deepened, at this event; and she speculated drearily upon his course of action and shivered at the possibility of a meeting between the men. Her distraction did not obscure the drift of John's last words, or blind her to the importance of keeping tryst at the beech, for he had made it clear that some disaster must over-

take them if she delayed her coming beyond the rising of the moon. It wanted twenty minutes to eight when Sarah started to meet the partner of her future life; and as her destination was only a short half-mile distant, she allowed ample time to reach it.

Meantime Aggett had passed down the hill five minutes sooner. It was a night of broken clouds. Rapid motion in the direction of the zenith seemed imparted to the stars, as scattered vapour, driven before a light northwesterly breeze, passed across them. With ascending movement, the moon would presently mount a silvery stairway of clouds and pass swimming upward across one scattered tract of darkness to the next. The nocturnal world beneath was full of soft light and sweet spring scent. Nature's busy fingers moved about those duties men see not in the act. From umbels of infant chestnut leaves she drew the sheaths, loosed the folds of primroses and wood anemones, opened the little olive-coloured buds of the woodbine's foliage, liberated the chrysoprased spears of the wild arums from the dry earth. A fern owl whirled and wheeled about a blackthorn tree that stood alone near Aggett's cottage door. Green leaves now clothed it, where a few weeks earlier blossoms had made the tree snow white. The spring green of field and forest and hedgerow looked wan under the increasing light of the eastern horizon; valleyward a

mist, born of recent rain, wound sinuously and shimmered opalescent, while above all loomed a background of night-hidden Moor. Viewed at this distance the waste returned no spark or twinkle from the sky, but extended, darkly and gigantically, along the horizon and made the upper chambers of the air shine out the brighter for its own dimensionless obscurity.

John Aggett passed from the embrace of the night wind into the denser atmosphere of the woods beneath. A stream brawled beside him and ran before the cottage of the Belworthys. Here he dawdled a moment, half in hope to meet Sarah; but he felt confident that she was in reality before him and would be waiting ere now at the beech. Proceeding downward, he passed a young man leaning against a gate. The youth stood quite motionless, and over his shoulder Aggett observed widespreading grass-lands. Upon the expanse of dim green, parallel bars of faint light between equal tracts of gloom indicated that a roller had been passed regularly over the field to better its promise of future hay.

The man turned, and John, knowing the other for Timothy Chave, guessed that he awaited a companion. Instant rage set his blood racing; the veins in his neck and forehead bulged; the muscles of hand and arm hardened, but he kept

in shadow and passed upon the farther side of the road where the stream ran. Timothy said "good night" in the voice of one who does not recognise him to whom he speaks; but Aggett returned no answer and, satisfied that he had not been recognised, soon passed out of earshot. His mind was now darker than the shadows of the pine trees, fuller of brooding whispers than their inky tops; but he fought against foreboding with the full strength of his will, set presentiment of evil behind him, and lifted his voice and spoke aloud to cheer himself.

"Her'll be down-along; her'll surely be down-along, dear heart, waitin' for me. She knows nought about the chap standin' theer. It can't be. She'm strong set to follow, for 'tis the road of her own choosin'."

He proceeded to the spot where Sarah had first promised herself to him. The beech bole shone ghost grey; as yet no copper-coloured bud-spike had opened and aloft the thickening tracteries, still spotted by a few seed-cases of last year's mast, shewed in wonderful black lace-work against the silver sky. Sarah Belworthy was not visible, and Aggett felt a mighty dread tightening at his stomach, like hands. He threw down his bundle and stick. Then he listened awhile, only to hear the jolt and grind of a wood-sledge proceeding down the hill.

He looked about him, calculated that it yet wanted ten minutes to moon-rise, then struck a light with a flint, puffed it into flame and sought idly for the initials and lover's knot that he had set upon the beech. His work had suffered little since its first completion; but now it vanished, for, upon some sudden whim, the man fetched out his knife, obliterated the inscription with a few heavy gashes, pared all away, and left nothing but a raw white blaze upon the bark. His own downcast condition puzzled him. Now, albeit within five minutes of his triumph, now, while each moment was surely bringing Sarah to him on tripping feet, he grew more morose and ill at ease. It was the thought of the other standing at the gate. Once more John talked to himself aloud to cheer his spirit. "Curse the fule — standin' so stark as a mommet¹ to fright pixies. Her won't stop for him — never. Her'll come; her's promised."

He repeated the words over and over again like a parrot; but a voice, loud as his own, answered him and mocked him out of the darkness. His life and its futility reeled before him, like phantasmagoria upon the night. He stamped and swore to disturb the visions; but as he waited and listened for Sarah's coming, the past took visible shape again and summoned pictures of days gone by, when he went

¹ *Mommet*. Scapegoat.

wool-gathering with little Sally on the Moor. No sound broke the silence, no footfall gladdened his heart. And then there floated out the moon over the black billows of the horizon. Very slowly its silver ascended into the sky and rained splendour upon the nocturnal earth. The hour of moon-rise was numbered with time past and the world rolled on.

Great floods of passion drowned the man. He flung himself upon the earth and beat the young green things with his clenched hands. The smell of bruised primroses touched his nostrils and in the spirit he saw Sarah Belworthy again bearing a great nosegay of them. She moved beside him through a bygone April; her laugh made music through the spring woods; her lips were very red; and round her girl's throat hung a little necklace of hedge-sparrow's eggs, blue as the vernal sky.

Aggett arose, rubbed the earth from his knuckles and began to tighten the thong he wore about his waist. But the leather under his hands suddenly challenged his mind, and he took off the belt and examined it.

"Her never loved me — never — never," he said to the night. "To leave me arter what I said — to leave me now knowin' — 'Tis enough. I be tired — I be weary of the whole earth. Her lied to me through it all; but I won't lie to she."

He flung down the belt, then picked it up again

and removed a little bag that was fastened to it and contained a few shillings in silver. This he placed beside his bundle. Then he flung the long snaky coil¹ of the girdle upon the ground and stood staring at it.

Elsewhere, Sarah, hastening down the hill five minutes after John had noted Timothy at the gate of the hayfield, similarly saw and recognised him. His presence reminded her of a fact entirely forgotten during the recent storm and stress. He was there by appointment and eager to hear the first rustle of his sweetheart's approach. Now her heart flogged at her breast and she felt her knees weaken. But she kept steadily on with averted face and instinct quick to find concealment in every shadow. She drew her hood about her and walked upon the grass by the wayside.

The man heard and turned, waking from a reverie. He saw his sweetheart even as she passed him by.

"Sally! It is Sally!" he cried.

She did not answer, though his voice shook her to the well-springs of her life; and he, supposing that she was about some lover's pretty folly, laughed joyously and came after her. Then she hastened the more, and he did likewise.

"A starlight chase! So be it, sweetheart; but you'll have to pay a heavy penalty when I catch you!"

Still she could not speak; then, perceiving that he must speedily overtake her, she found her tongue.

"For Christ's sake, doan't 'e follow me! 'Tis life — life an' death. Ban't no time for play. Turn back, Tim, turn back if you ever loved me."

Her tone alarmed him and he hesitated a moment, then came steadily on again, calling to Sarah to stop.

"Tell me what's amiss — quick — quick, dear one! Who should help you in the whole world but your Tim?"

Now her quick brains had devised a means of possible escape. The stream that ran by the road here passed immediately under a high hazel hedge, and the bank had been torn down by cattle at one point. Upon the other side of this gap extended a narrow meadow at the fringe of young coppice woods. Once within this shelter Sarah felt she might be safe. But there was not a moment to lose, for Tim had now approached within fifteen yards of her. A thousand thoughts hastened through the girl's mind in those fleeting moments, and not the least was one of indignation against her pursuer. She had bid him stay in the name of Christ, yet he paid no heed, but blundered on, dead to consequences, ignorant of the awful evil for which he might be responsible if he restrained her. To leap the stream was Sarah's first task — a feat

trifling by day, but not so easy now that night had sucked detail from the scene and banished every particular of the brook's rough course. Here its waters chattered invisible; here they dipped under young grasses and forget-me-nots; here twinkled out only to vanish again, engulfed by great shadows. The girl sped upon her uneven way, marked the gap ahead and in her haste, mistaking for light a grey stone immediately before her at a little bend in the stream, leapt forward, struck her feet against granite, and, falling, spread her hands to save herself. But, despite this action, her forehead came violently against the stone and her left foot suffered still more severely. She struggled to recover and rise, while her basket tumbled into the stream, scattering small, precious possessions on the water. With a desperate effort Sarah actually regained her feet, but only to lose consciousness and be caught up in Tim Chave's arms as she fell again.

Then it was her pursuer's turn to suffer; though rapid action relieved him of some anxiety and occupied his mind. The place was very lonely, the girl apparently dead. For half an hour he sought to revive her; then she opened her eyes and lifted them to the moon; and by slow stages of broken thoughts took up the thread of her life again.

"Thank God — thank God, my darling! If you only knew what I have endured! I thought you

had killed yourself and the terror of it has made me grow old. What, in Heaven's name, were you doing to run from me like that?"

She put up one hand to her head and uttered a shivering sigh, but as yet lacked the power to speak. Beneath her hair was a terrible bruise, and she felt that something stabbed her eyes and made them flash red fiery rings into the cold silver of the moonlight.

"Speak," he said, "just one little word, my treasure — just one word, so that I may know my life has come back to me."

Then she spoke, slowly at first, with increased speed as her memory regained clearness.

"No — no — no. Not to Tim — not back to Tim. I remember. I fell running away from 'e. You sinned a gert sin to come arter me when I bade 'e in Christ's name to let me abide. Help me now — now 'fore 'tis tu late. 'Tis the least you can do an' theer's a man's life hanging to it for all I know. Say nothin'; ax nothin'; help me — help me quick to go to un."

"To whom, Sarah? You're dreaming, lovey. Who should I take you to — your father? But I'm here — Timothy — an' thank God I was. What frightened you so? Like a moonbeam you went and nearly broke your neck and my heart together — 'pon my honour you did."

"Help me," she said. "Give over talkin', for it ban't the time. You'll know how 'twas some day. I've prayed solemn as you should know. Let me go down-along quick — quicker'n lightning — or it may be too late. Wheer's my basket gone? I had a li'l basket. An' allus b'lieve I loved 'e — b'lieve it to the end of the world."

"As if I ever doubted it! Now let me carry you right home, my little wounded bird. The sooner the better."

"No, I tell 'e. Help me to my feet — now this instant minute, if you doan't want me to go mad! Theer's things hid — terrible things! I must go. He won't wait for me; he swore it. Down to the gert beech he bides — Jan — Jan Aggett! Oh, help me, my own love; help me, Tim, for my body's weak an' I can't rise up without 'e."

"To him — help you to him!"

"I mean it. I can't tell you nothin'. For the love of the Lard, doan't talk no more. Oh, if I thwart un!"

She struggled desperately, like a trapped animal that sees dog or man approaching; and he helped her to stand, though now he scarcely knew what he did. Then the pang of a dislocated bone in her foot pierced the girl and she cried aloud and sank back breathless and faint with pain.

"I can't go to un, so you must. Hasten, hasten,

if ever you loved me, an' mend the gert wrong you've done by bringing me to this. Speed down to the beech at the corner o' the woods an' tell Jan Aggett what have fallen out. Never mind me; my foot ban't no account; but Jan — him — tell un I'm here against my will. Shout aloud through the peace o' the night as you'm coming to un from me."

Still he hesitated until her voice rose in a high-pitched shriek of impatience and she tore her hair and beat her breast. Then he departed and even ran as she screamed to him to go faster.

Once fairly started, Timothy made the best of his way to Postbridge for a doctor and man's aid to carry Sarah to her home. At the dripping well beside the stile he stopped a moment and shouted his rival's name till the woods echoed; but no answer came and he ran on, gasping, to the village.

Fifteen minutes later Timothy returned to the hill with a medical man and two labourers. Investigation proved that Sarah Belworthy had not been very gravely injured, though her mind was evidently suffering from some serious shock. She asked for Aggett on Tim's return and, being assured that he had left the beech tree before her messenger reached it, she relapsed into silence. Soon the slight dislocation in her foot was reduced and she lay in comfort on the pallet that she had thought to press no more.

CHAPTER XI

A SMALL boy, playing truant from his dame's school, discovered the nature of John Aggett's final action. The lad, seeking for those elements of mystery and adventure never absent from a wood, found both readily enough, where a great beech stood at the precincts of the pine forest. First a bundle in a red handkerchief with a stout stick lying beside it made the explorer peep fearfully about for the owner. Then he found him; and the small boy's eyes grew round, his hair rose under his cap and his jaw fell. Lifted but a few inches above his head, and hanging by the neck from a great limb of the beech, was a man weary of waiting for a woman who could not keep her word.

In the earth they laid John Aggett, at the junction of cross-roads not far from his mother's home; and they handled his clay roughly and, cutting a black-thorn stake from the tree by his cottage door, buried the man with old-time indignities and set no mark upon his grave.

For two years Sarah and Timothy were strangers after that night; then Farmer Chave passed to his ancestors and Tim found himself lord of Bellever

Barton and a free man. In course of time he won the girl back — indeed little effort was needed to do so. Their wedded life is not recorded and may be supposed to have passed peacefully away. A son's son now reigns in the place of his yeoman fathers; and his grandparents lie together under the grass of Widecombe churchyard. There, for fifty years an antique monument has risen above them, and a fat cherub puffed at a posthorn; but to-day gold lichens threaten to obliterate the manifold virtues of Timothy Chave and his lady as set forth on slanting stone.

And the other man rests lonely under the sloe tree; for its green wood grew and flourished to the amazement of those who set it there. Yet the purple harvest of that haggard and time-fretted thorn men still bid their children leave upon the bough; for the roots of it wind in the dust of the unholy dead, and to gather the flower or pluck the fruit would be to beckon sorrow.

‘CORBAN’

‘ CORBAN ’

“ ‘Tis a question which to drown,” said Mr. Sage.

He smoked his churchwarden and looked down between his knees where a mother cat was gazing up at him with green eyes. She purred, rolled half on her back and opened and contracted her forepaws with pleasure, while she suckled two kittens.

Mr. Sage’s daughter — a maiden of twelve — begged him to spare both squeaking dabs of life.

“They’m so like as two peas, faither — braave li’l chets both. Doan’t ’e drown wan of ’em,” she said.

“Thicky cat’s been very generous of chets in her time,” declared Mr. Sage. “If such things had ghostesses, you might see a ~~whole~~ regiment of ’em — black an’ white, tabby an’ tortoiseshell — down-along by the river come dark.”

“Even I shouldn’t be feared of a chet’s ghostie,” declared little Milly Sage.

But she had her way. One kitten, when it could face the world alone, was given to a friend who dwelt some miles distant at Princetown; the other grew into a noble tom of bold tabby design and genial disposition. His mother, feeling him to be

her masterpiece, passed gently out of life soon after her son reached cat's estate. She had done her duty to the feline community, and Milly mourned for her a whole week. But Mr. Sage did not mourn. He much preferred the young tom, and between the cat and the old man, as years passed by, there waxed a friendship of remarkable character.

"I call un 'Corban,'" said Mr. Sage, "'cause he was a gift — a gift from my little girl when she was a little 'un. 'Twas her own ram cat, you mind, but as the creature growed up, it took that tender to me that Milly said as it must be mine; an' mine 'tis; an' what he'd do wi'out me, or what I'd do wi'out he, be blessed if I know."

He spoke to his next-door neighbour and personal crony, Amos Oldreive, a gamekeeper and river-watcher for many years. Now this man was honourably retired, with a small pension and a great rheumatism, the reward of many a damp night on behalf of the salmon in Dart's ancient stream.

At Postbridge these old people dwelt — a hamlet in the heart of Dartmoor — a cluster of straggling cots beside the name-river of that region, where its eastern branch comes tumbling through the shaggy fens beneath Cut Hill. Here an elderly, disused, packhorse bridge crosses Dart, but the main road spans its stream upon a modern arch

hard by. The lives of Sage and Oldreive had passed within twenty miles of this spot. The keeper knew every tor of the waste, together with the phases of the seasons, and the natural history of each bird and beast and fish sacred to sporting. His friend's days were also spent in this desolate region, and both ancients, when necessity or occasion drove them into towns, felt the houses pressing upon their eyes and crushing their foreheads and the air choking them. At such times they did their business with all speed, and so returned in thankfulness to the beech-tree grove, the cottages and those meadowlands of Postbridge by Dart, all circled and cradled in the hills.

Noah Sage and his next-door neighbour quarrelled thrice daily, and once daily made up their differences over a glass of spirit and water, sometimes consumed in one cottage, sometimes in the other. Their conditions were very similar. Noah had an only daughter; Amos, an only son; and each old man, though both had married late in life, was a widower.

The lad and lass, thus thrown together, came naturally to courtship, and it was a matter understood and accepted that they should marry when young Ted Oldreive could show a pound a week. The course of true love progressed uneventfully. Milly was plain, if good health, good temper and

happy, honest eyes can be plain; while Ted, a sand-coloured and steady youth of a humble nature, leaning naturally upon distinction of classes for his peace of mind, had not a rival or an enemy in the world. Mr. Sage held him a promising husband for Milly, and Ted's master, appreciating the man's steadfast qualities, gave promise of the desired number of shillings weekly when Ted should have laboured for another six months at the Vitifer tin mines near his home.

Little of a sort to set down concerning these admirable folks had arisen but for the circumstance of the cat 'Corban.' Yet, when that beast had reached the ripe age of eight years and was still a thing of beauty and a cat of mark at Postbridge, he sowed the seeds of strife, wrecked two homes, and threatened seriously to interfere with the foundation of a third.

It happened thus: gaffer Oldreive, by reason of increasing infirmities, found it necessary to abandon those tramps on the high Moor that he loved, and to occupy his time and energies nearer home. Therefore he started the rearing of young pheasants upon half an acre of land pertaining to his lease-hold cottage. The old man built his own coops and bred his own hens, as he proudly declared. Good money was to be made by one who knew how to solve the difficulties of the business, and with greatly revived

interest in life, Amos bought pheasants' eggs and henceforth spent his time among his coops and foster mothers. The occupation rendered him egotistical, and his friend secretly regretted it; nor would he do likewise when urged to make a similar experiment.

"Doan't want no birds my side the wall," he said. "I've got a brave pig or two as'll goody into near so much money as your phaysants; an' theer's 'Corban,' he'd make short work of any such things as chicks."

Oldreive nodded over the party wall and glanced, not without suspicion, at 'Corban,' who chanced to be present.

"Let 'em taste game an' it grows 'pon 'em like drink 'pon a human," he said.

'Corban' stretched his thighs, cleaned his claws on a block of firewood, and feigned indifference. As a matter of fact, this big tabby tom knew all about the young pheasants; and Mr. Oldreive knew that he knew.

Sage, on the other hand, with an experience of the beast extending from infancy, through green youth to ripe prime, took it upon him to say that this cat was trustworthy, high-minded and actuated by motives he had never seen equalled for loftiness, even in a dog.

The old keeper snorted from his side of the wall.

"A dog! You wouldn't compare thicky, green-eyed snake wi' a dog, would 'e?"

"Not me," answered the other. "No dog ever I knawed was worthy to wash his face for un. An' he'm no more a green-eyed snake than your spaniel, though a good deal more of a gen'leman."

"Us won't argue it then, for I never knawed any use for cats myself but to plant at the root of a fruit-bearin' tree," said Mr. Oldreive, cynically.

"An' I never seed no use for dogs, 'cept to keep gen'lefolks out of mischief," answered Sage, who was a radical and no sportsman. He puffed, and grew a little red as he spoke.

Here, and thus, arose a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Noah Sage stumped indoors to his daughter, while 'Corban' followed with pensive step and a general air as though one should say, "I forgive, but I can't forget."

Three days later Mr. Oldreive looked over the wall, and his neighbour saw him, and put a hasty foot on some feathers.

"Marnin', Sage. Look here — what I wants to know be, whether your blasted cat have took wan o' my phaysants, or whether he haven't?"

"Might have, might not, Amos. Better ax un. Here he be."

Green-eyed innocence marked the fat round face of 'Corban.' He leapt upon the wall and saluted

the breeder of pheasants with open-hearted friendship.

“What be onder your heel, neighbour?”

“Why — a bit of rabbit’s flax ’twas, I think. My sight ban’t so good as of old nowadays.”

“Rabbit’s flax! ’Tis a phaysant’s feathers! Get away, you hookem-snivey Judas, or I’ll hit ’e over the chops!”

This last threat concerned ‘Corban,’ who was rubbing his whiskers against Mr. Oldreive’s waistcoat.

The ancient Sage puffed out his cheeks and grew as red as a rose.

“Ban’t the way to speak to any respectable, well-thought-upon domestic animal, an’ you know it, Amos.”

“Domestic!” echoed Mr. Oldreive, bitterly. “About so domestic as a auld red fox I sent off wi’ a flea in his ear two nights since. Domestic! He pretends to be to gain his private ends. Just a savage, cruel, awnself¹ beast of prey, an’ no better. Can’t shutt foxes, ’cause they’m the backbone of England; but I can shutt cats an’ — an’ —”

“Stop theer!” roared the other ancient. He trembled with passion; his under jaw chattered; he lifted his legs up and down and cracked the joints of his fingers.

“To think I’ve knawed ’e all these years an’ never

¹ *Awnself*. Selfish.

seed through to the devilish nature of 'e! 'Tis sporting as makes men all the same — no better'n heathen savages."

The other kept calm before this shattering criticism.

"Whether or no, I doan't breed these here phay-sants for fun, nor yet for your cat's eatin'. No call to quarrel, I should hope. But keep un his own side the wall if you please, else he's like to have an onrestful time. I give 'e fair warning."

"Perhaps you'd wish for me to chain un up?"

"Might be better — for him if you did."

"I doan't want you in my house to-night," said the owner of 'Corban' suddenly. "You've shook me. You've shook a friendship of more'n fifty year standing, Amos Oldreive, an' I can't abear to look upon your face again to-day."

"More shame to you, Noah Sage! If you reckon your mangy cat be more to you than a gude Christian neighbour, say so. But I ban't gwaine to fall down an' worship thicky varmint — no, not for twenty men, so now you know."

"So much for friendship then," answered Noah Sage, wagging his head.

"So much for a silly auld fool," replied Amos Oldreive, rather rudely; and they left it at that, and each turned his back upon his neighbour.

Not a word was exchanged between them for three days; then the keeper sent in a message by

Milly, who trembled before her parent as she delivered it.

"Mr. Oldreive sez that 'Corban' have killed two more of his li'l game-birds, faither. An' he sez that if so be as he goes for to catch puss in theer again, he'll shutt un! Doan't 'e look so grievous gallied, dear faither! I'm sure he never could do it after bein' your friend fifty year, though certainly he was cleanin' his gun when he spoke to me."

"Shutt the cat! If he do, the world shall ring with it, God's my judge! Shutt my cat — red-handed, blood-sucking ruffian! Shutt my cat; an' then think to marry his ginger-headed son to my darter! Never! the bald pelican. You tell him that if a hair o' my cat be singed by his beastly fowling-piece, I'll blaze it from here to Moreton-hampstead — ess fay, I will, an' lock him up, an' you shan't marry his Ted neither. Shutt my — Lord! to think as that man have been trusted by me for half a century! I cream all down my spine to picture his black heart. Guy Fawkes be a Christian gen'leman to un. Here! 'Corban'! 'Corban'! 'Corban'! Wheer be you to, cat? Come here, caan't 'e, my purty auld dear?"

He stormed off, and Milly, her small eyes grown troubled and her lips drawn down somewhat, hastened to tell Ted Oldreive the nature of this dreadful discourse.

"He took it very unkid," she said. "Caan't deny as poor faither was strung up to a high pitch by it. Such obstinate, saucy auld sillies as both be. An' if faither's cat do come to harm, worse will follow, for he swears I shan't have 'e if Mr. Oldreive does anything short an' sharp wi' 'Corban.'"

Ted scratched his sandy locks as a way to let in light upon slow brains.

"'Tis very ill-convenient as your cat will eat faither's game-birds," he said; "but knawin' the store your auld man sets by the gert hulkin' tabby, I'm sure my auld man never would ackshually go for to shutt un."

"If he does, 'tis all off betwixt you an' me — gospel truth. Faither's a man as stands to his word through thunder," declared Milly. "An' I ban't of age yet, so he can keep me from you, an' he will if Mr. Oldreive kills 'Corban.'"

"Tu late for that," answered Ted, very positively. "The banns was up last Sunday, as your faither well knaws. An' who be he to stand against an anointed clergyman in the house of the Lard? Us was axed out to Princetown for the first time last Sunday; an' I get my pound a week after midsummer, as I've told your faither. Then us'll take that cottage 'pon top of Merripit Hill, an' auld men must fight theer awn battles, an' us shall be out o' earshot, thank God."

“Us be meeting trouble halfway, I hope,” she answered. “I’m sure I’ll keep a eye ’pon ‘Corban’ day an’ night so far as I can; but you know what a cat is. They’ve got theer own ideas an’ theer own affairs to look arter. Why, if you set p’liceman ’pon ’em, they’d only laugh at un. ‘Corban’s’ a cat as be that independent in his ways. He’ll brook no meddlin’ with — ’specially of a night.”

“Well caution un, for he’ve got a ’mazin’ deal of sense. I hope he won’t be overbold for his skin’s sake, ’cause my faither’s every bit so much a man of his word as Mr. Sage; an’ what he says he’ll stick to. He’ve had to shutt a gude few score o’ cats in his business; an’ he’ll add your tabby to the reckoning, sure as Judgement, if any more of his phaysants be stolen.”

Thus, with common gloom of mind, the lovers separated and the clouds thickened around them. Their parents were no longer upon speaking terms, and tragedy hung heavy on the air. Then, in the deep and dewy silence of a June night, with Dart murmuring under the moon and the new-born foliage of the beech trees whispering their silky song, there burst upon the nocturnal peace vile uproar of gunpowder. Somebody had fired a gun, and the noise of it woke a thousand echoes and leapt with reverberations thrice repeated along the stone crowns of Hartland and Stannon and huge Broad Down.

Gaffer Sage rushed to his window, but could see nothing more than a puff of white smoke rising lazily under the moon. Trembling with dark misgivings, he crept back to bed, but slept no more. 'Corban' usually came to the old man's chamber at dawn, when Milly opened the house; but though she was stirring before five o'clock on the following morning, no 'Corban' bolted into the cottage when she unbarred the door; no familiar friend padded and purred "Good morning" to Mr. Sage; neither did 'Corban' appear at breakfast — a course very unusual with him.

Noah could not eat his meal for anxiety. He pushed away his tea, rose and walked into the garden. Upon the other side of the wall Amos Oldreive was casting grain to his young pheasants.

"Where's my cat to?" asked Noah Sage, bluntly. "I heard your gun explode last night. Did you shutt un? I've a right to know."

Mr. Oldreive was clearly nervous and ill at ease, his sallow face needing wiping before he replied. But his eyes shone defiance; he pointed at the pheasants ere he answered.

"A month ago there was four dozen of 'em," he said; "now theer be ezacally three dozen an' two. An' as for your cat, maybe I have shutt un, an' maybe I have not, so now."

"You ought to be stringed up for it, you grizzly,

auld, crook-back coward! I knaw very well you done it; an’ you’ll awnly be sorry once, and that’s for ever. Doan’t suppose you’ve heard the last of this. But I must take thought afore I gets upsides with you.”

He turned, went into the house and spoke to Milly. The man had aged strangely in five minutes, his voice grew squeaky and unsteady.

“He’ve — he’ve shutt un. He’ve shutt my cat!”

Then Mr. Sage took his stick an’ walked out upon the Moor to reflect and to consider what his life would be without his treasure. He wept a little, for he was not a man of strong intellect. Then his painful tears were scorched up, and he breathed threatenings and slaughter.

He tramped back to Postbridge with a mind made up, and bawled his determination over the party-wall at Amos Oldreive’s back.

“Your son shan’t have my darter now — not if he travels on his naked knees from here to Exeter for her. No darter of mine shall marry the child of a dirty murderer! That’s what you be; an’ all men shall knaw it; an’ I pray God your birds’ll get the pip to the last one among ’em, an’ come they grows, I pray God they’ll choke the man as eats ’em; an’ if I weern’t so auld an’ so weak in the loins, be gormed if I wouldn’t come over the wall

this minute an' wring your skinny neck, you cruel, unlawful beast!"

Mr. Oldreive looked round and cast one glance at a spot ten yards' distant, where the black earth looked as though newly upturned, near an apple tree. But he said not a word, only spat on his hands and proceeded with his digging.

A dreadful week passed, and Mr. Sage's mingled emotions and misfortunes resulted in an attack of gout. He remained singularly silent under this trial, but once broke into activity and his usual vigour of speech when his old friend sent him a dozen good trout from Dart, and a hope that his neighbour would let bygones be bygones. These excellent fish, despite his foot, Mr. Sage flung one by one through his bedroom window into Amos Oldreive's front garden; for what were trout to him with no 'Corban' to share them?

Behind the scenes of this tragedy Ted and Milly dwelt dismally on their own future. He clung to it that if the banns could but be asked a third time without interference, Mr. Sage was powerless; Milly, however, believed that she knew better.

"I be only eighteen," she explained, "an' faither's my guardian to do as he will with me until I come of age."

So they were troubled in secret until a sudden and amazing solution to the great problem came within

a week of 'Corban's' exit. The only apparent way to be Ted's wife was opened through lying, and Milly rose to the necessary heights of untruth without a pang. She felt that good must come of her evil conduct — good not only to herself, but to her unhappy father. His bereavement had cost him dear. He still preserved a great, tragical silence, but from time to time hinted of far-reaching deeds when his foot should be strong enough to bear him up.

There came a day when Milly walked to Princetown, and, entering into the house of certain friends there, rubbed her eyes and stood astounded and open-mouthed before the spectacle of 'Corban.' It was no feline apparition that she saw, but a live cat, with bold tabby markings of alternate rabbit-brown and black — a cat with strong, flat nose, cold and healthy; four good, well-defined tiers of whisker on either side of his countenance; green eyes, that twinkled like the twin lamps of a little train when seen by night, and a tail of just proportion and brave carriage.

"Lard save us!" cried Milly; "however did 'e come by this here cat, Mrs. Veale? I had Mr. Oldreive's own sacred word as he'd shutt un dead an' buried un onder his apple tree."

"That's our butivul puss; an' you should know how us come by it if anybody do, my dear, for you

bringed it here in a basket from Postbridge when you was a li'l maid six year ago."

Milly's active mind was working too rapidly to allow of any reply for some moments. Then she told Mrs. Veale of the recent tribulation at home, and in ten minutes an obvious plot was hatched between them.

"'Tis a peace-loving cat, an' if you butter its paws an' treat it a bit generous in the matter of food, 'twill very likely settle down along with you. Of course, you shall have un for such a Christian purpose as to bring them two dear auld men together again. An' the more cheese you can spare un, the more like he is to bide with you."

So Mrs. Veale; and Milly answered: —

"'Corban' was fond o' cheese, tu, an' his mother afore him! 'Twas a family failing, no doubt."

She scanned the cat narrowly and it mistook her attention for admiration, and purred in a soft, guttural, elderly way, and bent itself into a bow against her knee and showed much natural goodness.

"So like t'other as two peas!" declared Milly, not remembering that she had made exactly the same remark when this cat and its late brother were born. "Faither's sight ban't strong enough to part 'em if awnly this one behaves well," she added.

It was decided that the girl should come early on Sunday morning for her tabby peacemaker, and mean-

time Mr. Oldreive and his son were to be acquainted with the plot. As for Amos, he was an easy man, and had not slain his neighbour's poaching cat excepting under grave provocation. Ever since the deed he had regretted it, but he had never confessed to the actual crime excepting in the ears of Milly and Ted. Nobody had officially announced the death of his cat to Mr. Sage. Therefore, Milly hoped he would accept the stranger as his own, and suffer peace to return amongst them. The Oldreives, much cowed by Noah's attitude and frightened by his illness, gladly promised to do all they might for his daughter, and when Sunday came, she started for Princetown after an early breakfast and left her father behind her. He was in better health again, and she noticed, as an unusual circumstance, that he appeared very full of his own affairs upon that morning, and clearly desired her room more than her company.

With a heavy basket she set off homeward by nine o'clock. Inside the wickerwork a new 'Corban,' after protesting once or twice at the narrowness of its quarters, curled round nose to tail, abandoned itself to the freaks of chance and digested an ample breakfast.

But midway between Princetown and Postbridge, where the road traversed the high Moor and stretched like a white thread between granite hills

and glimmering marsh-lands, from whence the breeding plover called, Milly nearly dropped her basket. For along the way, in a borrowed market-cart behind his own brown pony, came her father.

"Why, where on airth be you drivin' to, my auld dear?" she asked; and Mr. Sage, puffing and growing very red, made answer:—

"I be gwaine up-long to Princetown to holy worship."

Now this was an action absolutely unparalleled.

"To church! What for?"

"If you must know, 'tis that I may forbid your banns wi' Ted Oldreive. No use to fret nor cry. I be firm as a rock 'pon it; an' I be gwaine to deny them banns afore the face of the Lord an' the people."

"Why ever should 'e do such a cruel thing, dear faither?"

"Because no blood o' mine be gwaine to mix wi' that murdering villain's."

"He never told you he shot 'Corban.'"

"D'you doubt it? Don't the whole of Dartmoor know it?"

"Let me get up in the cart an' sit beside you," said Milly. "I want for you to look in this here basket."

She leapt from the step to the driving-seat beside her father; then opened the basket. Grateful for

this sudden light and air, her burden gazed out, yawned, showed perfect teeth, black lips, and a pink mouth; then jumping boldly on to Mr. Sage's scanty lap, rubbed against him and purred deeply, while its upright tail brushed his chin.

"God's goodness!" cried the old man, and nearly fell out into the road.

"Somebody must have took un to Princetown," said Milly, outwardly calm though her heart beat hard. "Theer I found un none the worse, poor twoad. Now he's twice 'Corban,' dear faither, an' twice my gift to 'e."

The old man was entirely deceived, as anybody even of keen sight might well have been. The curious friendship of the cat also aided his delusion. He stroked it, and it stood up and put its front paws upon his necktie and rubbed noses.

"Glory be! Now us'll go home-along," said Mr. Sage.

His dim eyes were dimmer for tears; but he could not take them off the creature. His hands also held it close. Milly picked up the reins and turned the brown pony homeward, much to his surprise and joy.

And 'Corban' II., as though specially directed by Providence, played its part nobly, and maintained the imposition. Mr. Sage begged Amos Oldreive's pardon, and Amos, for his part, calmed his con-

science by assuring Noah that henceforth his cat was more than welcome to a young pheasant whenever it had a mind to one. A little strangeness on the part of the returned wanderer seemed natural in Mr. Sage's opinion. That he had apparently developed one or two new habits was also reasonable in a cat with as much new experience of the world. And meantime the wedding preparations were pushed on.

At the end of the week Ted Oldreive came home from Vitifer for Sunday; and he expressed joy at the sight of 'Corban,' once more the glory of his old haunts.

But the young man's face changed when Noah and the cat had departed in company, and a look of frank alarm made Milly tremble before danger.

"Why, what's amiss, sweetheart?" she asked, nervously. "All danger be past now, an' the creature's settled down as homely an' pleasant as need be."

"Matter enough," said Ted; "'tis a ewe cat!"

"A ewe cat! Oh, Ted, doan't say that!"

"'Tis so; an' God send her doan't have chets 'fore we'm married, else Postbridge won't hold your dear faither — nor Dartmoor neither."

**“A PICKAXE, AND A SPADE,
A SPADE”**

“A PICKAXE, AND A SPADE, A SPADE”

CHAPTER I

NEARLY two hundred years ago, when Miser Merle departed from life, his little corner of earth took heart and breathed again. Not that he had raised any very mighty mound of gold to stand between himself and the sunshine, but, according to his power, he had followed the traditional road of those similarly cursed, and though the circumstances of his life, as innkeeper of a small hostelry at Two Bridges by Dart on the Devon moors, made any huge accumulation impossible, none the less he was a right miser in grain, and died without a tear to balance his two thousand pounds of money. Some heartily cursed him on his unknown way; not one pretended to mourn his passing.

His wife was long dead — starved with cold on a winter night, so certain gossips loved to tell; his son the miser had driven out of England, and subsequent rumours of the young man's death troubled him not at all.

So it came about that, when the "Ring o' Bells" was masterless, an obscure maiden, who had dwelt there since Mrs. Merle's demise, found herself possessor of all the money, for Miser Merle left no will. Minnie Merle was his orphaned niece, and when the old man's unhappy partner shuffled off, he be-thought him of this girl. As a relation, lacking friends or position, she would come without wages. So, from the position of domestic servant in a Plymouth tradesman's family at three pounds a year, Minnie was exalted to be the handmaid of Miser Merle without remuneration of any kind.

"A man's own flesh and blood," he said, when first she came, "will understand, but I don't want to poison your regard for me with money, or reduce you to the level of a hireling. You are my niece; you and Nicholas Merle, in the North Country, are all the kindred left to me now that my wife has been taken."

So Minnie settled at the "Ring o' Bells," and, being young and healthy, survived conditions that had thrust her aunt untimely into the grave. The old man never trusted his niece again after a day upon which he caught her helping two hungry tramps to bread and cheese, because Minnie's idea of a pennyworth was far more liberal than Mr. Merle's; but she stayed at the inn, encouraged to the dreary necessity by local friends, who hinted to her, behind

her uncle's back, that such self-denial must in the long run find itself rewarded.

Then the Miser, who would not put on a pair of new boots while an old pair hung together, went through a long day wet-footed, and so received his death-blow. His last conscious utterance was a frantic petition to the medical man from Plymouth, when that worthy told him how all hope was vain.

"Then you did ought to take half fees," he gasped. "As an honest man, so you did; an' God's my witness that, if you don't, I'll never give you no peace after I'm took!"

But the physician had a material soul, feared nothing, and held out for his bond after the patient's departure. Minnie Merle, now a young woman of three-and-twenty, reigned at the "Ring o' Bells," and, with sense scarcely to have been expected from one of such youth and peculiar experience, she did wisely as maiden hostess of the little tavern. Albeit not lavish, she gave better value for money than Mr. Merle had given; the inn grew in popularity with the moor-men; and romance of an exciting nature hung about the place, because many husbands were in the air for Minnie, and as yet she had given no sign that the happy man was chosen. To discuss the subject with the woman herself was not possible for men, but Tibby Trout, an ancient gammer who cooked at the "Ring o' Bells," enjoyed the complete

confidence of her mistress, and all that Minnie desired to publish she merely murmured into Tibby's ear. The intelligencer had seventy years of experience behind her, and was considered even more artful than old.

Tibby enjoyed to serve in the bar, as a change from the kitchen; and at such times, when her mistress was not by, she would discourse, mete praise and blame, waken hope here, here chasten a mind grown too confident.

"Be it true, Aaron French, as you told a chap to Moreton that you knawed how the cat would jump?" she asked, on a night when the bar was full.

Aaron, a sand-coloured and a sanguine man, grew hot and laughed.

"Why," he said, "a chap may put wan an' wan together without any harm."

"No harm except to hisself. The wan an' wan you'm putting together in your foolish head — well, her may have named your name thoughtful-like now an' again, but not these many days now. In fact, you'd best to say nought about her to anybody, for you'm awnly like to look a fule come presently if you do. That man at your elbow might explain if he would."

Aaron French turned upon the labourer whom Tibby indicated, and sudden anger shook his high-pitched voice into a squeak.

"This be your work, then, Elias Bassett," he said, furiously. "You to dare! You — the most penniless chap 'pon Dartymoor!"

The young man addressed regarded Aaron without emotion. Elias stood a head taller than his rival, was ten years younger, and very much poorer; but he had a handsome face, a sturdy body, and a stout right arm.

"You'm a silly poult," he said contemptuously. "As if a sandy-headed little monkey like you would take any maiden onless he wanted her money. An' Mistress Merle have got two pounds for every one of yours. As for me, I doan't care a cuss for the stuff, and wish to God 'twas all drowned in Dart. All men know that I kept company with her afore her uncle died, never knowin' as she was gwaine to have his ill-got money; an' I wish her never had got it; for then her might have looked at me very like. But when it comed out her was up to her neck in gold, so to say, I knowed it must stand between us, and that a gamekeeper weren't no husband for her."

"You seed yourself as others seed you — an' that's a very rare thing," said another man.

"All the same, you're a zany for your pains," declared the old woman, who had learned what she desired to learn. "You kept company with missus — you say so. Then 'twas her place, not yours, to

say what was to be done after she was lifted up in the land. I doan't mean for a moment that she'd look at a velveteen coat, so you needn't fox yourself as you've got any chance at all with her — yet her did, careless-like, name your name to me among other chaps as didn't 'pear to have learnt any manners in their bearin' toward women."

A strong pulse stirred Elias Bassett's slow nature and made him stare at the withered old woman.

"No call to glaze like a gert bull wi' your eyes so round as pennies," she said. "An' what's more, you needn't take no comfort from what I've told 'e. I reckon her ban't for no Dartymoor market. Wi' her mort o' money an' dearth o' years, her can very well wait awhile wi'out jumping at the first clodpole among 'e as offers."

At this moment a strange man came among them and the subject was dropped for that time, before the interesting spectacle of a face unfamiliar to all present.

The new arrival carried himself as one superior to his company. He was booted and spurred, held in one hand a pair of holsters, in the other a riding-whip. He gave no general salute to those present, neither did he order refreshment, but casting one quick glance about him, addressed himself to Gammer Trout and asked to see the mistress of the inn.

Nicholas Merle was a big, clean-shorn man, with bright eyes, quick movements, and the assertive manner of one accustomed to have his way. There was no contempt in his attitude to the folk assembled, but he took it for granted that he exceeded them in importance, even as his interests rose above their own; and not one among them questioned the assumption.

"Acquaint Mistress Merle that I am come — her cousin Nicholas from Yorkshire."

Tibby curtseyed and went to do his bidding, while the new arrival out-stared each man present in turn, then went to the peat fire and kicked it.

"Give 'e gude day," said Elias Bassett, in a friendly tone. "I daresay now this here lonesome auld Moor do seem but a wisht, pixy-ridden place to a gen'leman like you be."

"It is very well, my good fellow — a little contracted, that is all. The wolds are more spacious, but a gentleman might make a living here if others would but let him. Does anybody with a fat purse ride this way?"

Elias and his companions stared, and the lower jaw of Mr. French fell until he appeared imbecile. Yet the stranger's cynical hint brought up his listeners a little more on to a level with him. Their virtue owed it to itself to stand as high as his confessed or pretended rascality.

"That sort of talk leads to a hemp collar, mister," murmured Bassett; but Merle shook his head.

"Mere talk leads nowhere," he answered. "It is the fashion of you clowns to take a jest in earnest. But have no fear. I am not come among you with any such purpose as the road. To-day I have ridden from Exeter and, since leaving Moretonhampstead, saw nought but carrion crows and a fox or two. This place tempts no man to dishonesty. I can see upon your faces that you scarce know the meaning of the word."

Gammer Tibby returned, and Merle, nodding in a friendly way to all present, followed her through the bar to the private chambers behind it. Then, hardly had the horseman clanked from sight, when Ostler Joe Mudge appeared with his mouth full of news.

"Wheer be the gen'leman to? Not here? Then I can speak. Aw jimmetry, what a hoss — if 'tis a hoss! Never seed the like in all my years! Come an' catch sight for yourselves, sawls, for you'll never believe me. Eyes like a human, an' a body all so bright as brimstone, to the last hair in the tail of un!"

While the loafers inspected a big horse of unusual colour, Nicholas Merle introduced himself to his cousin. They had never met before, and a deep interest and instant friendship awakened in Minnie's breast for the only relation she possessed in the

world. He was a tall, resolute man of thirty-five, with strange oaths and fatherly manner. He declared that chance alone brought him so far south, and that being at Exeter he had determined with himself to see his relations.

"Not until I reached Moreton did I hear of our uncle's death; then I should have come no farther, but I knew of your existence, and thought I would at least get a memory of you. And a very pleasant memory it will be, Cousin, for you're the queen of the Dartmoors, I hear, and so you should be. I never want to see a prettier maid."

But these statements, despite the speaker's convincing utterance and bluff manner of discourse, were by no means true. Nicholas Merle, chancing upon a journal nearly a year old, had read therein of his miser uncle's passing; and he knew that only one life stood between him and the dead man's fortune. So he forsook his usual haunts, to the satisfaction of better men, and galloped westward to look into the matter for himself.

CHAPTER II

WITHIN less than a week of the young man's arrival at the "Ring o' Bells," Minnie was heartily grieved that she had commissioned Mrs. Trout to hint a hope in Elias Bassett's ear. She and the gamekeeper had indeed been close friends before her uncle's death, and it troubled her that after the change in her fortunes Elias avoided the old intimacy and feared to be with her alone. Yet she admired him still, and more than ever, contrasted him with those who hummed about her like hungry wasps, since her prosperity. Now, however, to her secret shame, Minnie Merle began to see that she had dropped the handkerchief too soon. Upon the very day.—within the actual hour—that Bassett received his polite hint, a greater than Bassett burst upon the vision of Minnie, and soon she hung on her cousin's words, quite dazzled by the dashing manners of him, reduced to daily blushes by his gallant address and courtly fashion of love-making.

These things, however, Elias did not perceive; nor did the newcomer dazzle him. When the coach from Exeter to Plymouth left a box for Mr. Merle, and he blossomed forth next Sunday in russet and

plum-colour, Bassett called him a popin-jay; and the keeper killed Minnie's old friendship at a breath by telling her in round terms, with the forceful periods of that time, that her cousin was either less than he proclaimed himself, or more.

"Not a plain-dealer, an' you'll live to know it. Ban't natural to bring chapter an' verse to everything a man speaks, same as he does. No honest man wants a cloud of witnesses to his least act or word. He goes in fear for all his noise."

"His way may not be ours, Mr. Bassett, but we're a good deal behind the times, and it does not become you or any other man to call my cousin in question. He is very superior and genteel, I'm sure, and as for honesty, I never met a more honest man."

"Ess fay, an' you have; an' you'll find it out after you'm married to un, if not afore," said Elias, bluntly.

Minnie flamed and frowned angrily upon the speaker.

"That's a very rude speech, and I never expected to hear you say such a thing."

"Wish to God I could say different. I'd tell a lot more against your cousin if I didn't love you wi' all my heart an' soul; but, being so set upon you, I can't speak with a free mind, so I'll speak nought. Doan't 'e be vexed wi' me, my dear woman. You know right well as I'd go 'pon my naked knees from

here to Lunnon town to do your pleasure. Awnly I ban't blind, an' I see how this dashing chap's bold front have cowed us all round about. Love of you would keep a man true an' honest if 'twas in the nature of un so to be, an' I doan't say but Nicholas Merle be right at root; but I mislike un, 'cause I'm very jealous for you, Minnie Merle, an' I pray you'll take your time an' not jump into his arms fust moment he axes you to marry him, as he surely means to do come presently."

The girl grew a little soothed before this soft answer.

"I'm sure you mean very well, Elias Bassett, an' I'll remember what you say, for it's a foolish softness toward me that makes you say it. We'm auld friends ever since I came to Two Bridges, an' I doan't think no worse of you for speaking your mind. But you'm quite out o' bias. Such a dashing man as my cousin do carry himself civil an' polite to all, because he can't help it. 'Tis his smooth custom. He wouldn't think of me as a wife. Why should he — a maiden so rough of speech an' manner? An' li'l enough to look at, I'm sure, to an eye as have often been filled by town-bred girls. Doan't 'e fret, theer's a gude man. He'm awnly biding along wi' us because he likes the strong air an' the Devonshire cream an' honey. He'll be off as he came — all of a sudden some fine day, no doubt."

But Bassett shook his head, and, indeed, facts presently proved that he was right, the girl mistaken. Nicholas made no haste to depart from the Moor. He took mighty rides over it upon his brimstone-coloured horse; he endeavoured to win the friendship of all men, and nearly succeeded, for he was generous and a good sportsman — sure credentials to the regard of the folk. Only Bassett and another here and there maintained a stubborn and doglike mistrust. Nor were the sceptics free of reasons for their attitude. Elias was laughed at as a man ousted from hope by a better-equipped rival, and the fact that his undue bitterness was naturally set to the account of defeated love, chastened his tongue; but in truth Mr. Bassett's regard for Minnie had little to do with his emotion. He was an honest man, and not prejudiced overmuch against young Merle by their relations. Nevertheless he had a lodged loathing against him, read craft into his apparent candour, secret policy into his open-handedness, simulation into his great affectation of being fellow-well-met with all. A lad of no imagination, Bassett none the less went heavily in this matter, and was oppressed with the sense of evil at hand. A dull premonition, to which he lent himself reluctantly, spread events in their sequence before him ere they fell out.

Then accident presented him with a solid fact,

and that fact, as is the nature of such things, opened the door to many problems. But some weeks before the day that his acquired knowledge set young Bassett's brains upon the whirl, there had happened the foreseen, and Minnie was engaged to be married to her cousin. Liquor ran free on the evening of the great news, and few were those who left the "Ring o' Bells" in silence and sobriety. Elias at least was not among them, for, faced with the engagement, he abandoned his antagonism in a sort of despair, told himself that it was idle to fight fate, single-handed, and so drank Minnie's health far into the night and went home to his mother's cottage as drunk as any man need desire or deplore to be.

The time was then late summer, and the wedding was fixed to take place at Widecombe in November. This matter determined, life pursued its level way, and Nicholas Merle, who appeared to have no business or affairs that called him elsewhere, dwelt on at the "Ring o' Bells," enjoyed the best that the inn could furnish him, and spent his time between courting his cousin, in a manner much to her taste, and riding far afield over the land. Sometimes she accompanied him on her Dartmoor pony, sometimes he went alone.

There came a day in the bar when Gammer Trout was able to furnish the company with a morsel of news.

"Master Merle got a packet by the mail esster-day," she said. "Fust as ever he've had since he comed; an' not to his taste neither. 'Twill call him off, for he set his teeth and frowned when he read it, an' said as he must be gone in a week an' wouldn't be back much afore the wedding."

"Who might the packet have come from?" enquired Aaron French; but Tibby could not tell. She believed in her future master and gave the man a short answer.

"That's his business. Us all have our troubles."

"I be the last to speak anything but praise of the gen'leman," declared Aaron. "Yet he is a man of mystery, an' his goings an' comings work upon no rule that a plain head can figure out to itself."

"Done a purpose," declared Joe Mudge; "nought goes home to a maiden's heart like mystery. 'Tis meat an' drink to a fansical female. A fellow do bulk large in the innocent eyes of women folk if they think he've got a hidden side to un — a side as nought but the moon do know."

They returned to the subject of the packet; and then it fell out that, within half an hour of that time, the great fact already alluded to faced Elias Bassett, and an accident thrust the fortunes of a man and a woman into his hands.

As he left the "Ring o' Bells" a little later, his

mind upon the packet, Nicholas Merle himself set out on horseback, and galloped away in a direction that the keeper pursued more slowly on foot. And as he viewed the receding figure, a speck of white suddenly fluttered into the air behind it and fell upon the moor-path. Ignorant of his loss, the rider went forward, and Bassett, convinced that he had seen the identical object of recent discussion, marched along his way. His purpose, arrived at hastily, was to pick up the letter, conceal it, and give it to Minnie with the frank advice that she would do well to read it; but in the event he did no such thing, for as he stooped to gather up the paper, a thud of hoofs came to his ear and he saw that Nicholas Merle had discovered his loss and was returning to make it good if possible.

He dropped the writing unseen, a flash of wisdom leading to that course; but he did not do so until two words had chanced to fall upon his eyes — two words of such tremendous significance that they quite dazed the mind of Elias.

"Dear husband —"

He read that much, then moved quickly away from the letter and pretended to be picking and eating blackberries a hundred yards distant, as Merle rode past him with his eyes straining to right and left of the way. The rider banished his care and cracked a jest with Bassett; then, looking back-

ward, without appearing to do so, Elias saw Merle dismount and clutch up his letter. A moment later he resumed his ride, and went whistling along upon his great, bright horse.

CHAPTER III

THE first inclination of Elias Bassett was to meet his rival, man to man, and settle this outrage by force of arms; but after four-and-twenty hours with himself he decided against that course. To do the best for Minnie without afterthought for his own gain was now the keeper's duty. He put himself resolutely out of the question, and even debated whether he should impart his discovery to another, and so stand aloof from the necessary deed; but his nature would not go so far along with him. He was a man faced with a rascal and an enemy, and that rascal must be unmasked by him, not another. The work before him was in itself so congenial that to delay proved difficult. Therefore Elias quickly planned his course of action, and the hour for it. Yet he was disappointed, for on the morning of a day that he had fixed to confront Merle and break the evil news to Minnie, Nicholas himself departed unexpectedly. He was to be absent until the time of the wedding.

Upon this circumstance Bassett pondered through another day, then suddenly strange matters hurried his decision and anger opened his lips.

Returning by night to the hamlet of Two Bridges over the high Moor, Elias met Minnie Merle alone walking quickly toward the lonely gorges of West Dart, where the river roars and echoes under Wistman's primeval wood of oaks. Darkness was already come, but a moon hidden under low clouds made all clear. Only the river, full after a freshet, filled the silence with ebb and flow of watery music, that waxed and waned upon the wind. The lonely wood, shunned even by day and held a haunted region by night, huddled there like a concourse of misshapen goblins. Huge planes of shattered granite sank from the hills to the river valley, and the red fox and shining adder alone found a home in this fantastic forest of humped, twisted and shrivelled trees. But to Minnie the desolate spot was good. She associated it with her lover; there, when the sunlight shone and little blue butterflies danced above the briars, Nicholas had asked her to marry him; and now, under gathering night, it was upon a secret errand connected with her cousin that she stole along when the keeper met her, to their common surprise.

"A strange hour for a walk, sure enough!" he said. "What wonnerful secret be taking you on the Moor at this time of night?"

"It be a secret," she answered, "so ax me no more about it, an' go on your way."

"I'll tell you another secret for yours, Minnie Merle. Wheer be you gwaine so quick?"

"To Wistman's Wood — that much I'll let you know — no more. Now go your way, Elias, like a gude man."

"Ban't you feared?"

"Not of Wistman's Wood. 'Tis nought but a cluster of honest old trees."

"Well, I'll come along with you."

"An' I won't let you. Three's no company."

Elias stared and shifted his walking-stick from one hand to the other.

"Gwaine to meet somebody?"

"Why not?"

"What would your young man say?"

Minnie laughed.

"Since you ax, I think I may answer that he'd say I was in the right. Now you know enough — tu much. Leave me — I won't have you go another yard with me."

"I do know tu much for my peace," he said; "but 'tis you who don't know enough. I've waited a longful time to speak, but now I'll do it, though I break your heart. Better that than ruination. This man — Nicholas Merle — he'm married, an' that packet he got — 'twas from his ill-served wife."

"You coward; you liar; you wicked, venomous snake!" cried out Minnie. "To stand theer afore

your Maker an' hatch that lie for the ear of a loving woman! Oh! I wish I was a man; I'd tear — but he shall — he shall — he shall know it this night!"

Her passion revealed her secret. She saw what she had done, grew a little calmer and explained.

"This is the last time I'll ever foul my breath with your name, Elias Bassett; but since you've surprised this out of me, I must say more. If you've a shadow of honour, you'll keep a secret I swore not to reveal to a soul, yet have now revealed in anger to you. The fault was yours. When my true love went away, he told me that I might find to-day a letter in a secret spot known to both of us far away upon the Moreton road. I went there — rode my pony out this morning — and a letter waited me. I tell you these things that you shall breed no more lies against him or me. In that note he told me that he should be at Wistman's Wood to-night at a familiar spot I wot very well. And he is to let me into gert news. Wonnerful things have happened to him. But he is supposed to be far away, and that he is tarrying here is my secret. And now you have surprised it out of me. At least I can trust you not to breathe of this to any living soul if ever you loved me."

"I shall keep silent, be sure, since you find it in your heart to give me the lie and call me 'snake.'"

"I saw the letter that you pretend to have seen.

He showed it to me. Not that I asked to see it. I would trust Nicholas before the sun. You are dreaming, or else very wicked. The packet was from a scrivener. It concerned money. 'A wife'! This is jealous madness. He never looked at any woman before he met me."

"If I be wrong, I'll beg his pardon on my knees."

"You be most wickedly wrong. He is the soul of honour."

"Then let me come now with you."

"Not for the world. He would never forgive me if anybody heard of this meeting. It is vital to his interests that it should be supposed he is far away."

"Cannot you see there is danger for you in this?"

"Danger with him? How little you know what love means for all your talk, Elias!"

"It is because I know what love means that I care so much. Let me be somewhere near — out of sight and earshot of speech, but not too far off for a cry to reach me if you wanted help."

"Each word you say makes me hate you worse, Elias Bassett."

"At least let me stop here an' see you home again afterward."

"Never! I've done with you. You ban't a good man. Besides, you would have to wait for

hours. I be very early for our meeting. Nicholas will not be there afore eleven o'clock.”

“And if you never come home again, Minnie Merle?”

“Then you may tell all men what you have heard to-night, an’ go an’ seek for me. If Nicholas knowed you were his enemy, he would shoot you like a dog. So be warned.”

“And yet you cannot see that if he is married already, you are his worst enemy! He can’t marry you and get the money that way, so —”

She turned and ran from him without another word, and he watched her sink into grey moonlight until the Moor swallowed her up. A dim spot a mile away on the night marked Wistman’s Wood; and from it, through the fitful noise of the river, an owl’s cry came faintly, like the sound of a wailing child.

CHAPTER IV

ELIAS sat upon a rock and so remained a long while with his head between his hands. Then he got up and walked slowly homeward; while Minnie Merle, despite the fact that she was far too early for her appointment, proceeded steadily toward Wistman's Wood. Presently, with a light, sure foot, she entered the old forest and passed where auburn autumn foliage rustled under the wan light. The wind sighed here and there in the stunted timber, then died off and left the place breathless, awake, watching as it seemed.

There was a familiar tree whose boughs, heavily draped with grey lichen and metallic-coloured mosses, made amongst them a comfortable sort of couch. The low branches scarcely sprung above the rocky earth, and many a deep cleft and cranny lay beneath the withered boles. Here the wood-rush flourished, and the briar, and the little corydalis shared sunny corners with the snake on summer days. Where Minnie now climbed, that her head might rise above the low crowns of the wood, ivy and whortleberry grew, and polypody ferns extended along the limbs of the tree. About each dwarf,

bleared and hoary, moved festoons of ash-coloured lichen, like ghostly dryads grown old. The arms of the trees were bedded with centuries of decayed vegetation, their trunks were twisted into the shape of fossil beasts; yet life was strong in them; yearly they broke their amber buds; yearly they blossomed and bore fruit.

Gazing about her and wondering from whence her mysterious lover would appear, Minnie was suddenly startled to see a huge creature moving in the night. It came toward her, magnified by the moon. Supposing it some wandering ox from the herds of half-wild cattle that roamed the Moor, she was glad of her elevated security; but the object proved a horse, and on it a man sat—the man she loved best in the world. Nicholas was also very early, and, well pleased to find it so, his sweetheart prepared to leap out of her refuge and run to him, when something made her hesitate and she waited a moment and watched her lover dismount.

He carried a curious long parcel under his arm, and the girl wondered what manner of gift this might be. Then, within twenty yards of her hiding-place, Nicholas Merle, having consulted a big watch, proceeded to a curious occupation that first puzzled the watcher, then froze her young limbs with an awful chill not born of cold.

First, tethering his horse on the high ground above

the wood, the man lighted a lantern, set his pistols at his elbow on a stone, and turned to the long parcel he had brought with him. From this he unwound some rope and produced a spade and a short, heavy pick. He took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and sought a place for digging. Presently a hollow between two great slabs of granite met his view, and carefully thrusting away the briars, ferns and honeysuckle that draped this spot, he set to work and began deepening it with his tools. A mound quickly grew at hand, and a long, narrow hole began to yawn between the shelves of stone. He toiled with all his might and feared not to sing at his labour. Then, as he lifted his voice, the words he uttered told his deed to the girl who, above in the ancient oak, looked down through a screen of red leaves. She shook so that the dry foliage rustled all about her, but Nicholas Merle's own melody filled his ear and he sang the historic song of another he once had watched mimicking the same business that now engaged him in earnest:—

“ A pickaxe, and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet :
O ! a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.”

Then the girl in the tree grasped the friendly limbs and cowered close and set her teeth to save

herself from fainting and falling, for she knew that she watched the digging of her own grave. She struggled with herself to think what she should do; but to solve that problem was easy enough. Her life depended upon the sheltering tree. The pistol that glittered at Merle's elbow was waiting for her young heart.

Half an hour before their appointed time of meeting Merle finished his labours, hid his tools, trailed the weeds over his work and then, putting on his coat, blew out the lantern and sat down to wait his cousin's arrival. And presently, while Minnie watched and wondered how long his patience would keep him in Wistman's Wood, and how long her strength would bear the ordeal of this terror under nightly cold, she saw another shape, and a tall man's form suddenly heaved up out of the darkness.

He approached the other, and spoke. Then the girl felt her fears almost at an end, for it was Elias Bassett. He had indeed turned his face homeward, but could not find it in his heart to obey Minnie.

"Late work and strange work, neighbour," said the keeper. "I've bided hidden an' watched you this hour, an' yet I be so much in the dark as when I comed. Who are you, and what do you here?"

"I mind my business, and do you the like, if you are a wise man!"

"Why! 'Tis Nicholas Merle! I thought you had gone home to your wife."

The other rose and Elias saw his teeth flash white under the moon.

"You rash fool, are you so weary of living that you come here to hunt for your death? Yes, Nick Merle — a name that if you were a northern clown instead of a Westerner, would make you shake in your shoes. You know too much, my good clod. You had been wiser to leave this wood alone to-night, for leave it again you never will."

"Yet that grave was not dug for me, I suppose?"

"No, since you are curious. But I can find room for two in it."

He snatched up a pistol and fired point-blank. Bassett felt a fiery stab in his shoulder; then he dashed in and closed. The men rolled together upon the ground, but handicapped by his wound, the keeper had little chance. His grip relaxed, his head fell back, and the other, who knew that he had hit him, supposed the man was dead. Merle dragged his foe to the grave, and rolled him in without ceremony; then, seeing that Elias moved, hearing that he moaned, the rascal turned to get his second pistol and make an end of the matter. But the pistol was in another hand. Minnie had seen her old suitor slain, as she supposed, and a great grief for the moment banished personal fear.

In that moment she acted, leapt quickly to the boulders beneath her hiding-place, crept near the battle unseen, and, as her cousin returned and stood erect, she confronted him with his own weapon raised and cocked.

"Brave heart!" he cried. "You had come to my rescue, dear Minnie, but, thank Heaven, I was one too many for this blackguardly footpad myself. He had traced me, how I know not, and wanted my watch. But he'll need the time no more. He sleeps, and no stroke but the stroke of doom will waken him again. Give me my pistol, dear heroine!"

"Nay," she said. "I am not deceived. I know my life is in my hand, and I am not going to put it into yours. Come an inch nearer and I will shoot you, for you are a murderer, and worse than a murderer."

The man fell back. He had himself taught Minnie to shoot with small arms, and he knew that she was a good pupil.

"Sit down and let us talk," he said.

"With that poor man groaning his life out there — for me? Go — go now. If I was not a weak fool, I would shoot you in cold blood."

He reflected rapidly, then so acted that he might deceive her into his reach, and surprise the weapon from her before she could use it.

"You will live to regret this dreadful error, Minnie Merle. No man or woman wrongs me without suffering for it. There is some treachery here; but I will be even with my enemies. I always am."

He went slowly toward his horse and she hung back and let him lead the way.

"Little did I think when I taught you how to use that toy that you would one night turn it against your faithful lover," he said with deep sorrow in his voice.

"I have seen you dig my grave," she answered. "You are not worthy to live. Go, because I have loved you."

He slowly mounted into his saddle, very slowly gathered his heavy hunting-crop that hung hitched to the holster; then, as quick as lightning, he hit out with the heavy handle, trusting to strike the girl on the head and bring her down before she could fire.

Minnie started backward, and, to her horror, the jerk of her movement, although it saved her life from the blow, exploded the pistol. Now, defenceless, she prepared to fly, but the man's laugh of triumph was broken by a horrid scream of pain from his horse. The ball had struck it high on the neck and the great brute reared up and became unmanageable. So sudden was the action that Merle came off. A second more and he would have rolled into safety; but, at the moment of his collapse, even as

he fell, the frantic creature kicked out and a steel-plated hoof, with the strength of a flying chain-shot, crashed into his head behind the ear and cut away half his skull. Under the moon oozed forth the brains that had plotted Minnie's death, and she turned shuddering, while the great horse, with a cry almost human, galloped into the night.

Bassett lived, as Minnie soon discovered. His wound still bled, but she tore her linen, stanchd the flow and supported him upon the way until his strength gave out again and he sank down upon the Moor, while she fled forward for succour.

* * * * *

The name of Bassett warms Devon hearts to-day, and it was the generation that followed Elias that wrote their worthy patronymic large upon the earth and blazoned it in history. Yet the sons of Minnie, and her grandsons and great-grandsons, loved best in their annals that tragedy of the highwayman, their mother's cousin — Young Nick, as he is called — and the story of his efforts to prevent them from coming into the world by sending their mother out of it. They have waxed high in the land, and men have blessed them; yet their joy in Sir Elias Bassett, Lord Moreton, is not greater than that they take in plain Elias, the statesman's grandfather. Men made a riddle about Minnie Merle and her grave — a jest that sets three generations laughing; but

of late this joke has hidden within the pages of old, curious journals. There, indeed, many such-like strange matters shall be met with. Long they lie forgotten, buried in an ancient chronicle, tombed for centuries under the lumber of a muniment chest, until bidden to rise and live again.

JONAS AND DINAH

JONAS AND DINAH¹

CHAPTER I

"I PUBLISH the banns of marriage between Jonas Lethbridge, bachelor, and Dinah Mary Hannaford, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is for the first time of asking."

A pleasant rustle ran through the little congregation — an amiable and friendly sound. Jonas and Dinah sat together through the ordeal of the banns, and, out of sight, he squeezed her hand to support her.

"The maiden went so red as a rose, an' the man pale as a dog's tooth. Did 'e note it?" asked Blacksmith Chugg of Sexton Lethbridge, after service was at an end and the village folk had vanished.

"I noted that, and more than that. Old as I am, and so round in the back as a beetle with a lifetime o' burying, yet my eyes be gimlets o' sharpness still,

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thank God! 'Tis a trick my son Jonas have gotten from his mother. The red never comed in her cheek at high moments — blood all rushed to her heart, an' her growed so white you might have thought as her was going to die on the spot. When I axed her to marry me, she went fainty-like, an' her lips turned blue. But a good wife she was as ever a man lost an' mourned. They wondered how I could find nature enough in me to dig her pit myself. The fools! To think that a grave-digger like me could have rested easy in my bed if another had done it!"

"I hope as Dinah Hannaford will be such a wife an' mother as your missis an' mine," said the blacksmith. "But why for did tenor bell — that chap, Amos Thorn, the woodman — get up an' leave the church when they was axed out? A very unseasonable think to do."

"I marked it," answered Mr. Lethbridge. "Jonas says that Dinah kept company two years back with Thorn. But they falled out, because he have such a surly habit of mind an' her couldn't put up with his tantrums no more. If her so much as looked at another man or gived a chap 'good-day,' Thorn would go crazy; an' as life promised to be a burdensome business wi' such a touchy fashion o' man, she took courage to break off."

"A very sensible maid, they say."

"So she is, then; never seed any young woman with more sense. They be coming to live along wi' me. Then my old sister, as does for me now, can go off comfortable into that empty almshouse offered her to Tavistock."

Elsewhere the lovers walked and talked in a Devon lane. Her arm rested upon his, and grim exultation marked his features. Stern and hard was his countenance, yet his eyes glowed kindly and flashed with love as he looked down at her face. Ferns in all the glory of new green hung fronds about the way; seeding grasses softened the verdant banks, and flowers brightened them with red and purple. Field-roses and dog-roses trailed their beauty above, and in the air was scent of eglantine and song of bird. Speedwells and cinquefoil made blue-and-gold lace-work in the vernal walls of the lane; hawthorn turned to roseal harmonies in death, and the last bluebells faded.

"You'll love me for ever, my own dear?" she said.

"Till my heart be done wi' beating, Dinah," he answered. "No trouble as was ever hatched by man or the devil will come betwixt you an' me."

CHAPTER II

"I PUBLISH the banns of marriage between Amos Thorn, bachelor, and Dinah Mary Hannaford, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is for the first time of asking."

Again there followed a rustle of many curious folk; but a different emotion animated it, a different sound infused it. Human nature woke up and buzzed. This was more than merely pleasant; it was interesting. Mr. Thorn and Dinah Hannaford were not in the little church to face two hundred pairs of eyes. Jonas Lethbridge accompanied his father, and while the ancient grave-digger's head drooped and his mouth trembled, where it fell in over naked gums, the young man gazed unflinchingly before him, and no quiver marked his strong, hard face and dark eyes. He kept them fixed unblinking on a stained glass window that represented Christ bidding the waves be still.

Again the old-time neighbour of Sexton Lethbridge stumped along beside him under spring leaves; but

Jonas had disappeared as soon as the service was ended.

"Very sorry for your son, my dear soul; for I lay the fire in his eye was burning out of his heart if us could have but seen it," said Mr. Chugg, the blacksmith. "What a courage he've got to come to worship!"

"'Tis a very dreadful thing for all of us, Chugg."

Mr. Lethbridge spoke wearily. Of late his natural forces were abated, and Jonas did much of the work of the churchyard.

"Every maiden in the village be sorry for him," said the blacksmith.

"An' well they might be."

"Thorn hadn't the brass to be there hisself, I see. A chap from Princetown ringed tenor bell to-day."

"God won't never prosper such treachery, you mark me," said Mr. Lethbridge.

"If 'tis God's business to put down treachery, He'm a thought behind His work — to say it respectful. My experience is that the ungodly do very well 'pon Dartymoor. Be your sister going to bide with you?"

"Yes; she'm stopping. Her wouldn't go in the almshouse when the wedding fell through. But it won't be for long. I'm getting ripe an' ready for the grave myself now."

"The women of this generation ban't no better than reptile toads. But your young chap will find a good wife come presently, please God. There's a tidy maid here an' there yet."

"Not him. He'll bide a bachelor for evermore. He'm so bitter as gall to the roots of his being since she wrote that letter. It have turned him away from the Almighty's Self."

"Chucked him over with a letter, did her?"

"Ess — an' a very nice fashion of penmanship. Yet all written wi' needles, so to say, as stabbed the poor young youth cruel. He gasped when he read it, as if he'd swallowed his meat wrong way. Then he handed it to me. She just said as she'd been wickedly deceived in him, and that she'd rather have trusted the sun not to shine than believe he could have acted so bad to her. An' she also hoped the Lord would forgive him for treating a poor maiden so crooked."

"That weern't enough for Jonas Lethbridge, was it?"

"No, by Gor! He went straight to her, an' there was fiery words; but the truth, or what she thought was truth, he never knowed. Her love had turned to hate in a single night. He pressed for reasons; and she said that to ax for reasons was the worst insult of all, seeing she knowed the whole secret truth about him. Not a word more could he get,

though he tried, and was patient as Job for an hour of talk. Then, having his spark o' passion like any other man, he called her a wanton, wicked jilt an' left her. An' no girl ever deserved hard names more than she."

"'Tis a dark story, to be sure. That's why us never heard the third axing of the banns, then?"

"It happened last spring, afore the last axing. Then, come winter, Dinah Hannaford's mother died, an' next thing us heard was that she'd got on wi' Amos Thorn again."

"A very womanly piece of work."

"I don't know whether 'tis woman or man be at the bottom. I'd throw blame on Thorn if I dared wi'out running danger of violence; but I be old an' weak, an' 'tis no good saying things you can't enforce wi' your right arm. Still, I do think he kindiddled her away from my boy."

"'Tis no libel to think it, anyway," said Mr. Chugg, and the sexton nodded.

"There's parties as ought to be punished wheether or no," he said, "and I hope the A'mighty won't let it pass, an' that I'll live to see the wicked come by their deserts."

A mile away Amos Thorn and Dinah walked together where immortal flowers bloomed about them at the dawn of June.

"Oh, but you'll be true to me, dear heart — I can trust you?" she asked with a pleading voice.

The big blond man turned and hugged her to himself and kissed her.

"For ever an' ever, Amen, my pretty!" he said.

CHAPTER III

“FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope —”

The clods fell; the familiar rite ended. There was a smell of earth and bruised grass. Dinah Thorn looked down into her husband's grave; and her child of three, clutching tight his mother's black-gloved hand, peeped fearfully into the abyss that had swallowed his father. Suddenly the infant appeared to realize his loss, and howled with all his little heart.

Anon every man went to his own house, while Mr. Lethbridge began to fill the grave. His friend the blacksmith had been one of the bearers. He, too, stayed behind; and now Chugg lighted his pipe, and sat upon a tomb, and watched the sexton. Once more they played the part of chorus.

“’Tis a wonder to see you with the spade again.”

“As to that, I'm past it — have been these three year — but this particular job — well, somehow,

Jonas had got a feeling that he'd cussed the chap so often in life that he couldn't dig his pit decent; an' I be clever yet for such an old blid, so I comed out o' my well-earned rest. Can't say as it hurt my mind to dig, though my rheumatics will smart for it come to-morrow."

The earth dropped from the shovel, and the coffin beneath rumbled to the thud.

Old Lethbridge worked slowly, and stopped often to talk.

"'Twas always said he'd got a careless way of throwing elms. An' now an elm have throwed him. A great tree in Widecombe Park falled when he was looking t'other way, an' a bough scat his brains out. An' now he'm coffined in elm, an' never good wood held a worse man."

The blacksmith smoked and shook his head.

"Yet the Church feels no doubts of him. Have 'e ever marked the cocksureness of the parsons? 'Tis that I marvels at! 'Sure and sartain hope' be the words. When they buried Sam Pridham, the poacher — him as beat his wife and dranked the boots an' shoes off his children's feet — parson was just so dead positive 'bout it as when he put away my old woman, who was a holy saint o' God, bar her temper. How can us know that it have pleased the A'mighty to take to Hisself the soul of this here Amos Thorn?"

"We can't be sure, and for my part I ban't," said the other. "We know mighty little of any man except this: that king and tinker breed the same fashion o' worms come they die. The chap down there was a liar, an' he won Dinah Hannaford from my son by a wicked trick. He told her falsehoods — 'twas this dust I'm covering with honest earth that made dust of my son's life; an', old as I am, I be glad to bury him. If 'tis wicked, then 'tis wicked; but, any way, 'tis true."

"Don't puff an' fret, my dear. He'm gone now, an' 'tis very bad for you to be so hot at your age. He'll get his proper payment. For that matter, he have got it."

"I say us have no right to believe that God have took this man's soul to Hisself. It ban't justice, an' I won't stomach it. Nice company for the bettermost in heaven! The like of Amos Thorn —! Tchut! I can't onderstand it."

"'Tis a very difficult question, and best left alone," said the blacksmith, uneasily. "It be quite enough to know there is such a place. I never much like to think about it."

"Us have more right to commit his soul to the Dowl, an' a lot more reason, too," said the angry ancient. "Do 'e think I've read an' pondered the Scriptures fifty years for nothing? The wages of sin be death; that's a cast-iron, black-an'-white

fact; and I'll back the Bible against the Prayer-book any day of the week for money. If Bible's true, he'm lost."

"The punishment do fall on his wife an' child, come to think of it. He was cut off so sudden, an' left no provision for 'em at all."

"That's the law and the prophets," declared Mr. Lethbridge. "Sins of the fathers be visited on the children — also pretty often on the widows, though they ban't named by name."

"Where's the justice of that, then? Got you there!" cried the blacksmith, triumphantly.

"If you've got anybody, you've got the Old Testament," answered the other, grimly, "an' I'd advise you to call home your words again, an' not flout the Book o' Life in a graveyard. 'Twon't be for your good. An' such things will turn the scale at Judgment. The man was cut off, an' 'tis the quality of punishment not to stop at the sinner, but to catch the innocent folk all around him — like measles or a fever do."

"As a husband, it be generally granted he was a very good an' proper man," ventured Mr. Chugg.

"You can't be a good husband and a bad man."

"You'm so quick at words, there's no being even with ye!"

Then the blacksmith went his way, and his friend shouted after him:—

“Justice be justice; an’ for my part I’ll always tell the truth, as I always have, whether it be to a man’s face or his coffin-lid.”

CHAPTER IV

THERE came a day after long years, and June smiled as of yore, and the scythe of Jonas Lethbridge smoothed the grassy graveyard, even as the scythe of Time filled it. He took a gloomy pride in the place; and while his father, who now slept beneath, had been content to dig deep and bury well, this silent man passed his abstracted days among the graves, and made the face of the little churchyard fair to see.

Few problems troubled him; yet upon this hour in young summer he was faced with a difficulty. He paused, looked with down-drawn brows at a faint path worn in the grass between certain tombs. It was a way trodden there by a woman's feet, and it led — not to the grave of Amos Thorn, but to a little mound near it, where the woodman's son slept beside him.

"Haven't spoke a word to her since her flinged me over, an' never thought to; but 'tis my duty," the sexton reflected, "an' my duty I must do. I could set sticks across, but she'd only think I was 'feared of her. For that matter, so I be."

Opportunity offered within the hour. The man

mowed, and the blackbirds sang. From an ancient tomb, long sunk out of straightness, came a tapping where a thrush broke a snail and feasted upon it. The air danced, and the scythe's strokes rose and fell regularly, like the deep breath of a sleeper.

Then came a woman, and her feet pressed the grasses where Lethbridge had too often marked their passing. His face grew white, his brows frowned, and he put down his scythe and came forward. Dinah saw him, and hesitated and stood still. A little bunch of purple columbines fell out of her hand, and she bent and picked them up.

"Mrs. Thorn," said the man, "I must ax you to go around t'other way to your graves in future. I won't have 'e trapsing about here. You'm wearing the young grass away. See how bad it do look. An' if you'd only let your child's grave alone, the turves would jine suent and smooth; but you'm always putting in jam-jars wi' flowers in 'em, an' planting things that die, an' worrying the place so cruel that no grass can grow. I don't want to say nought to hurt your mother's heart, but the grave will never look seemly the way you treat it; and I shall be blamed."

She stood in a dream to hear his voice again.

"If tears could make it grow —"

"Tears! 'Tis a poor, feeble sorrow tears will drown."

"Men an' women be different. Tears do soften the cutting edge to us females. But I'll go round t'other way henceforth, Mr. Lethbridge, an' I'm very sorry I hurt the grass and troubled you about it."

He looked hard at her, and the mists of memory rose a little from off his spirit. Life had left him petrified, while for the woman the years were full, mostly of sorrow. Her husband and child were both dead, and she lived alone.

Now the man's cold heart felt a throb.

"'Tis strange to hear your voice," he said. "Do 'e ever think 'bout the old days, ma'am, or do they hurt 'e?"

"Both," she said. "I think an' I suffer. But I've lived a lifetime since then."

"Yet you ban't very old now?"

"Twenty-six, Mr. Lethbridge."

"I know that well enough — twenty-six come tenth o' next month — July."

"I was very sorry for 'e when your old faither died."

"So was I."

"He never would speak to me after —"

"Faither was a very great man for justice. An Old Testament man, you might say. 'Twas he as digged your husband's grave, Mrs. Thorn. I couldn't do it."

"Amos Thorn wronged you more'n ever a man wronged a man — God rest his soul."

"An' he wronged you?"

"I've forgiven him," she said.

"He told you as I had a woman an' a child hidden down to Newton Abbot."

"I've forgiven him."

"An' you could believe it?"

"I've never forgiven myself, nor never shall."

There was a silence.

"Well, if you'll keep off this here place an' go round by the old stones there, I'll thank you. I take a pride in the burying-ground, as be well known. The graves be wife and children to me. If you'll look around at other churchyards, you'll see there ban't one this side of Plymouth that's so trim and tidy as this."

"It's well known; people comes from long ways off to see it. I'll be careful in future not to do harm."

She turned, and followed the road that he pointed out. Then she put fresh water in a jam-pot, and arranged the columbines upon a little mound of sickly turf. Hard by his scythe began its measured rhythm in the heart of the green grass.

CHAPTER V

THE light took a golden tincture before dusk, and nature rested. Mellow sunshine cast long shadows, interspersed with a tender radiance; the cottages and house-places were still; and peace brooded over hamlet and homestead, for the day's work was done.

The 10th of July sank to lovely close, and through a blue dusk one window glimmered on the confines of the village.

Toward it walked a man, and in his pocket he carried a little parcel. Once he hesitated, and seemed disposed to hurl his gift into the hedge and return whence he came. But he held on, and presently reached the cottage door and knocked at it.

"Might I come in an' have a tell, Mrs. Thorn?" he asked in a deep voice.

There was a moment of silence, then a fluttered uprising.

"Yes, if you'm in a mind to, Mr. Lethbridge."

BENJAMIN'S MESS

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WHEN Farmer Yelland died, everybody in Post-bridge village was sorry — for theirselves, but not for him, mind you. Because if ever a good man went straight to glory 'twas Michael Yelland. He'd had his ups an' downs like the best an' worst of us; but though the poor old gentleman weern't overblessed in his life, — nor yet his only son for that matter, — yet 'twas made up to him in a manner of speaking, for never a farm in Dartymoor did better. His things were always the first to be ready for market; his grass was always ready to cut a week ahead of his neighbours, an' he always had fine weather to cut it in; while as for his corn an' roots — why, at the Agricultural Show to Ashburton, it comed to be a joke all over the countryside, for first prize always went to Yelland as a regular thing. The Lord looks after His own, you see, in His own partickler way. An' such a patient, large-hearted man as he was! When Sarah Yelland, his wife, was took off, after clacking nonsense for fifty year, us all thanked God in our hearts for her good man. For 'tweern't a happy marriage, an' he'd had more to put up with unbeknownst

in his home circle than falls to the lot of many of us. But not an unkind word did he ever say either afore or after she died. Never would grumble about it, but kept his thoughts to hisself. I mind I met him in the churchyard six months after he'd buried his wife, an' he was smoking his old clay pipe an' seeing about a granite gravestone for the tomb.

"So there her lies at peace," I said in my civil way.

An' farmer takes his pipe out of his mouth an' spits 'pon the grave, but not with any rude meaning.

"Yes, John," he says to me. "There Sarah lies, poor old dear — at peace, I hope, I'm sure. Anyway, if she's so peaceful as I be since her's gone, she'll do very well."

Two year after that he was in the pit beside her, an' the space left 'pon the stone was filled up with his vartues.

Then Nicholas Yelland — his son — a lad five-an'-twenty years old an' a bit cross in the grain — found hisself master of Cator Court, as the place was called. We shook our heads, for he was known to us as a chap pretty near spoilt by over-educating. Old Yelland had got his patience an' sense from the land, an' his wisdom an' sweetness of disposition out of no other book than the Bible; but his

missis had great notions for her one an' only child, an' she wanted more than the Bible could teach him; which, in my judgement, is to cry out for better bread than can be made of wheat. Farm-ering weern't a grand enough trade for him, she thought; so she kept nagging an' nagging by day an' night, till, in self-defence, the old man sent his lad to Tavistock Grammar School — a very great seat of larning in them days, by all accounts. Yet what they didn't teach him was worth knowing too, for manners he never larned, nor yet his duty to his neighbour. He comed home at seventeen with some Latin, 'twas said, though 'twas only rumoured like, an' a very pretty way of reading the lessons to church on Sundays; but when he returned, the first thing as he told his faither was, "I be a Radical in politics evermore, an' I ban't going to touch my hat again to nobody living. One man's so good as another."

"So he be, Nick," said his faither. "An' a darned sight better, too, for that matter. The world will larn 'e that, if nothing else. I'm sorry ever I sent 'e to school, if they've taught 'e such tomfoolery there. But life will unlarn 'e, I hope. To touch your hat to your betters ban't no sign of weakness in you, but a sign of sense. Lord Luscombe hissself takes off his hat to the King, an' the King takes off his'n to God A'mighty. 'Tis the

laws of Nature," said farmer, "an' if you break the laws o' Nature, you'll damn soon get broke yourself, as everybody finds out after they'm turned fifty, if not sooner."

But Yelland died, as I tell 'e, an' the young man comed to his own. With all his airs an' graces, he knowed when he was well off, an' of course followed his faither's footsteps an' stuck to the land, despite his mother's hopes, as planned an' prayed with her last breath for him to be a lawyer. Though why a lawyer should be a greater man than a farmer, you'd have to ax a lawyer to tell 'e. An' I won't say that Nicholas was a bad farmer. He'd got sense, though no broad-mindedness. The difference between him an' his faither was showed by a path-field as ran through Cator Court lands and was very much used by folks coming up from Widecombe to Postbridge and the farms round about, because it saved foot-passengers a good mile of walking, an' it had been there time out of mind. But there weren't no right of way with it all the same, an' farmer he always used to shut it up one day a year to make good his claim in the eye of the law. He wouldn't have turned back the leastest little one he'd found on the field-path, for 'twas his pride an' pleasure always to make life easier for man, woman an' child when the chance offered. An' the boys had the filbert nuts an' the girls had the mush-

rooms; an' he never minded, bless you; he liked 'em to be there.

Well, this here carmudgeon of a young Yelland — first thing he done, out of pure sourness of disposition, was to shut up the field-path an' stick up a lot o' scowling nonsense 'bout "trespassers would be prosecuted." So much for his radical ideas an' everybody being equal! But it's always that sort who talk loudest about the rights of men, be the sharpest about the rights of property. Belted Earls will throw open their beautiful parks, but you won't catch common men doing it. An' the boys knocked young Yelland's boards down with stones, an' broke his hedges; an' the Widecombe people, as didn't care a snap of the finger for the man, took their even way as usual. He spent half his time storming up an' down the great meadow in the farm-bottom, where Webburn river goes clattering to meet Dart; but he only turned back women an' children, for he was a little chap — thin an' not overstrong — so men just told him to get out of their road, else they'd knock him upsy-edgeways into the hedge.

But of course such a state of things couldn't last. There comed a terrible day when he turned back Mr. Matthew's wife — Matthew being the miller to Widecombe an' a churchwarden, an' a man of high renown in general. Then us had a proper tantara,

an' Matthew he took the opinion of Lawyer Pearce, an' Pearce he had a tell with young Yelland, an' parson Courtenay of Postbridge, he also done what he could; which was nought. They might so well have talked to a fuzz-bush as Nicholas. He stuck out his chin — he was a underhung toad, like a bulldog — and he said that rights was rights an' land was land; an' he turned on parson, like an adder, and said: "If you'll open a footpath through your vegetable garden an' let all Postbridge walk up an' down it when your gooseberries be ripe, then I'll do the same with my meadow, an' not sooner."

But parson, whose heart was in gooseberries, said the cases weren't similar; an' Nicholas held out they were.

Matters was let sink for a bit after that, but the upshot made a story, an' people laugh yet when you tell 'em about it.

You must know that young Yelland was courting just then, an' he'd got his hands so full with Mary Jane Arscott, the stone-breaker's darter, that for lack of leisure — nought else — he didn't watch his path-field so sharp as usual. The storm died down a bit, an' by the time that the matter of Mary Jane had come to a head, things were fallen back into the old way. All the notice-boards was knocked down — most of 'em had floated along the river; an' the people went to an' fro on Yel-

land's path, just as if his faither was still alive. He'd only made a lot of enemies by his foolish conduct, an' that thought made him so grim as a ghost, an' poor company for every living soul.

Well, this Mary Jane was a very fine woman — rather on the big side for a girl of twenty-two; but the small men always look for a large, helpful pattern of maiden, an' Nicholas was as much in love with her as he could be with any mortal she, despite her humble circumstances. Her liked him too, up to a certain point; but 'twas the sort of fondness a maiden naturally gets for any young man who be very well-to-do, an' have a fine house an' land an' a prosperous business. 'Tis hard to make up your mind about such a man, specially if he'm a trifle undersized an' underhung, an' not generally well liked by the neighbours. But, for all that, Mary Jane Arscott kept his beautiful farm in her eye an' seed her way pretty clear, if it hadn't been for a young youth by the name of Benjamin Pearn. But for him no doubt she'd have said "yes" long ago — perhaps afore Nicholas had had time to get out his proposal of marriage, for she comed of very pauper stock, an' had never known comfort in her life. But this here Ben Pearn chanced to have just what t'other man lacked — a comely countenance an' a fine, manly frame to him. A blue-eyed, sandy-headed man — hard as nails an' fairly pros-

perous for a chap only turned four or five-an'-twenty. He was a shepherd in springtime; an' looked after the common lands; an' he was verger of the church; an' he kept bees; an' he'd lend a hand at thatching or painting of sign-boards, or harvesting, or any mortal thing. But his father had been a famous poacher, though of course I ban't bringing that up against the man. Yet, with all his cleverness, he was a fool when he falled in love, as a many afore him. 'Twas love for Mary Jane found out the soft spot in him, an' showed that he was a thought weak in his head, for all his business, and could do an underhand deed, like anybody else in the same fix. For when we'm struck on a maid, if us can't see how to fight fair in it, us all fights foul without a blush. Which shows love ban't a Bible vartue, but just a savage strain in the blood, if you come to think of it. Besides, you can't forget his father was a poacher.

Between these two men, Ben an' Nicholas, it rested, an' Mary Jane took her time to make up her mind. She was in love with Benjamin's self an' Yelland's farm. That's how it stood. She didn't want to miss the farm, an' she didn't want to miss Benjamin; but her couldn't have both; an' her found it a bit difficult to make up her mind, though Lord He knows her faither an' mother done their best to make it up for her. They had an eye

on the gert chimney-corners to Cator Court, no doubt.

Then things happened that helped Mary Jane to decide.

The rights of it got out long after, but what took place was this, for I heard it direct from Nicholas. Whatever else he was, he was a truth-teller. One fine evening in late summer, when Yelland was walking down his field-path in a devil of a gale, because he found that folks had been breaking his hedge again for the hazel-nuts an' running all about the meadow after mushrooms, there comed by Ben Pearn, an' he marked the trouble an' spoke.

"'Tis a shame to see what you get for your goodness in letting folks go up an' down your field-path, Mr. Yelland," he says.

But Nick looked at him sideways, for he knowed Ben was his rival, an' didn't feel like trusting him a yard.

"They wouldn't be here if I could help it. But seemingly I can't," he answered back.

Ben nodded.

"The law won't help 'e? 'Tis a crying shame; but if I was you, I'd help myself an' hang the law."

"I've tried often enough, surely. I've done every mortal thing that I can think of. I wish to God us was allowed to use man-traps, like landowners did in the old time. But the law's got so weak as water

nowadays. A man mayn't even shoot a burglar, they tell me. 'Twill be a penal offence next to ax a housebreaker to leave the family Bible behind him."

"Well, there's man-traps an' man-traps. The meadow be yours to do what you please with, ban't it?" says Ben, very artful like.

"It did ought to be."

"You can graze sheep in it?"

"Yes."

"Or cattle?"

"Of course. What's that to do with the matter?"

"You might even let your great red Devon bull, as takes so many prizes an' have got such a douce an' all of a temper, run loose there, if you was minded to — eh?"

"By Gor!" said Nick Yelland. "If that ban't an idea!"

"I judge you wouldn't have no more trouble then, Nicholas. Better'n notice-boards. He'd work quicker, too. One sight of him would be enough for most people."

"Thank you," said the farmer. "Thank you very much. You'm a quick-witted chap, for sartin, an' I'm greatly obliged to you. I'll turn him in this very evening, an' be damned to everybody."

An' so he did, an' next day that gert bull was

wallowing in a pool o' mud in the middle of the meadow an' wondering at his luck.

An' when young Ben left Yelland he went straight down to see Mary Jane Arscott. A crooked game he played, sure enough!

They had a bit of love-making by the river, for she lived in a cot down that way; an' then Ben arranged to meet her next day an' go out upon Bel-lever Tor an' pick whortleberries. But he never said no word touching his talk with Nicholas Yelland.

Well, the girl started pretty early from her mother's cottage down the valley and came up as a matter of course over the path-field past Cator Court; an' for that matter, Yelland had long since given her special permission to do so. Her was halfway across the great meadow, with nothing in her thoughts but mushrooms an' whortleberries an' Benjamin Pearn, when there comed a sound very high-pitched an' ugly. It got louder an' deeper till she heard a proper bellow, an' there, right ahead, she seed Nick Yelland's great red Devon bull, a-pawing an' a-prancing as if he was trying to dance the sailor's hornpipe. If he'd been a thought farther off, no harm could have come, for the path-way ran nigh the hedge; but as it was, Mary Jane had a narrow squeak, for she'd roamed a bit to pick mushrooms, an' when the old bull went for her, she'd got fifty

yards to get to the hedge, an' he'd got a bit more than a hundred to catch her. He was in a good temper, I believe, an' never really tried to hurt her; but what's a joke to a bull may be mighty serious earnest for a twelve-stone female.

She dropped her basket an' ran for her life. She weren't built for running, but nature will do a great deal, even for the roundest of us, in a pinch like this, an' for once her got over the ground in very fine fashion. She'd reached within ten yards of the hedge, when she heard a shout, an' a man came tearing along; but he was too late. Mary Jane went head first into the hazel hedge, screaming to the Everlasting to spare her; an' the bull's horn just gave her the ghost of a touch — enough to swear by after — as she went through, all ends up. She weren't really hurt, an' only took a chair a thought gingerly for a day or two; but by God! her temper didn't heal so easy, I promise you — not by no means; an' presently, when the man as had shouted an' runned to help her took the poor maiden home, she let him know what she thought about the world in general an' Nicholas Yelland in particular, so soon as she had got wind enough to tell with.

Of course the man was Benjamin Pearn. An' he knowed really that the path-field ran nigh the hedge, an' he'd been dead sure as Mary Jane would

not get into no real danger. Besides, he had planned to be there in plenty of time, an' it wasn't till he actually seed Mary Jane flying an' the bull a-bellowing after her with his tail up an' his head down, that he knowed what he'd done. Then he rushed out from the hedge, where he was hid, an' thanked his stars in secret, for everything had happened just ezacally as he wanted it to — though I don't suppose he ever wished for the maiden to have such a narrow shave.

"To think!" gasped Mary Jane. "To think as I might be a lifeless jelly this moment but for my own legs! As 'tis, that gert beast's horn have horched me somewheres, an' I may die of it yet. An' if you'm a man, Benjamin Pearn, you'll go an' get your gun an' shutt him."

"God's goodness! you don't mean Mr. Yelland?" said Ben.

"No, I don't; you can leave him to me," the maiden answered; "I won't have no living soul come between me an' Nicholas Yelland now. He'll be sorry as he was born afore his dinner-time, if I've got a tongue in my head; an' he shall have all Postbridge hooting at him in the open street — an' Widecombe too — come to-morrow. But 'tis your part to shutt thicky beastly bull wi' a gun; an' if you love me, you'll do it. He shan't take no more prizes, if I can stop him."

"As to shooting the bull, they'd put me in prison for it, — not that I'd mind that if you'd have me when I comed out," said Ben, very eager like. "But," he added as an after-thought, "the dashed luck of it is, I haven't got a gun."

Her black eyes flashed an' her gipsy-dark face growed darker still. She still panted an' puffed a bit. But Ben confessed arter that she never looked so lovely afore or since as she did when he pulled her out of the brambles in the hedge an' comforted her.

"You'd best to borrow a gun, then," she told him. "Anyway, I won't marry you while that bull's alive; an' if you was a man, you'd never sleep again till you'd put a bullet through it."

Same afternoon she went up with her mother to Cator Court an' gave Nicholas Yelland the whole law an' the prophets, by all accounts. I seem his ears must have tingled to hear her; but he was a pretty cool hand; an' when she'd talked herself out of breath an' falled back on torrents an' oceans of tears; an' when her mother had also said what she comed to say, which was mere tinkling brass after Mary Jane, Nick popped in a word or two edgeways.

"If you'll be so very kind as to hold your noise a minute, — the pair of you, — I'll tell you how the bull got in the field," he said. "'Twasn't my idea at all. Ben Pearn put me up to it. So you've got

to thank him, not me. I didn't know as you was coming that way to-day, God's my Judge, or I'd have been at the stile to meet you an' see you over the meadow safe; but Pearn knowed you was coming, an' any fool can see that he wanted to kill you."

"He axed me to come," said Mary Jane.

"Did he? Then 'tis him you've got to thank, not me. 'Tis only by the mercy of Heaven he ban't a murderer."

"You'd better look after him, then," said Mary Jane, thoughtful like, "for I've told un to kill your bull."

"Let un," answered Nicholas, very cunning. "I've a good mind to shoot the old devil myself for daring to run after you."

Then Mrs. Arscott struck the iron while it was hot, an' afore she left that farm parlour, Mary Jane had named the day!

'Twas rather a funny case of a chap overreaching himself in a love affair. You see, Ben Pearn was so blessed soft-headed, that he couldn't look on to the end of the game like any cleverer man might. He said to his silly self, 'I'll make her hate the chap, so she'd like to scratch his eyes out'; but he never seed that the end must be differ'nt; he never remembered that Nicholas Yelland had a tongue in his head same as other people.

So Ben was sent off with a flea in his ear, an' the world laughed at him, an' he changed his opinion about marriage an' growed to be a hard an' fast bachelor, an' a very great lover of saving money. But as for Mary Jane, she did her husband a power of good an' enlarged his mind every way. An' when they got a family, young Yelland's nature comed very well through the usual ups an' downs of life. He fancied hisself less, an' thought of his little people an' his good lady first, an' growed a bit more like his faither before him. Not, of course, that he was the man his faither was. But what chap ever be, for that matter? I never see none.

CROSS WAYS



CROSS WAYS

CHAPTER I

THERE is a desolation that no natural scene has power to invoke. The labour of Nature's thousand forces upon earth's face may awaken awe before their enduring record, but can conjure no sense of sorrow; for high mountains, huge waste places and rivers calling shall make us feel small enough, not sad; but cast into the vast theatre some stone that marks a man's grave, some ruined aboriginal hut or roofless cottage, some hypæthral meeting-place or arena of deserted human activity, and emotions rise to accentuate the scene. Henceforth the desert is peopled with ghosts of men and women; and their hopes and ambitions, their triumphs and griefs glimmer out of dream pictures and tune the beholder to a sentiment of mournfulness.

Such a scene on a scale unusually spacious may be found in the central waste of Dartmoor, nigh Postbridge. Here, where marshes stretch, all ribbed with black peat cuttings, between the arms of Dart, where Higher White Tor rises northward

and the jagged summits of lesser peaks slope south-erly to Crockern, there lies a strange congeries of modern buildings rotting into dust and rust at the song of a stream. Even the lonely groves that shield these ruins are similarly passing to decay; but many trees still flourish there, and under the shadows of them, or upon the banks of the Cherry-brook that winds in the midst and babbles its way to the mother-river, stand scattered remains of a considerable factory. Now only a snipe drums or a plover mews plaintively, where some short years ago was great hum and stir of business and a colony of men engaged upon most dangerous toil. Rows of whitewashed buildings still peep from the dark grove or stud those undulating hillocks that tend moorward beyond it. Tall grey chimneys rise here and there, and between certain shattered buildings, linking the same together, great water-wheels appear. These from their deep abodes thrust forth shattered spokes and crooked limbs and claws. They slumber half in gloom, like fossil monsters partially revealed. From their dilapidated jaws there glitters the slime of unclean creatures; moss hides the masses of their putrefied bones; huge liverworts clothe their decay, and hart's-tongue ferns loll from their cracks and clefts, and thrive in the eternal twilight beneath them. Once twin pairs of grinders turned here, and the last aspect of these is even more un-

couth than that of the water-wheels that drove them. Their roofs are blown away and the rollers beneath are cased in rust and moss. Willows and grasses and the flowers of the waste flourish above their ruins; broom, dock, rush, choke the old water-courses; crowfoot mantles the stagnant pools that remain; and all is chaos, wreck and collapse. For here spreads the scene of a human failure, the grave of an unsuccessful enterprise. Its secret may still be read in dank strips of old proclamations hanging upon notice-boards within the ruins, and telling that men made gunpowder here; but those precautions necessary to establish the factory upon a site remote from any populous district indirectly achieved its ruin, for profits were swallowed by the cost of carriage from a situation so inaccessible.

At gloaming of an autumn day one living thing only moved amid the old powder-mills, and he felt no emotion in presence of that scene, for it was the playground of his life; his eyes had opened within a few score yards of it. Young David Dacombe knew every hole and corner of the various workshops, and had his own different goblin names for the quaint tools still lumbering many a rotting floor, and the massive machinery, left as not worth cost of removal. Mystery lurked in countless dark recesses, and Davey had made secret discoveries too and was lord of tremendous, treasured wonders

hidden within the labyrinths of these crumbling mills.

But at this moment all things were forgotten before a supreme and new experience. The boy had just caught his first trout, and a little fingerling fish now flapped and gasped out its life under his admiring eyes. Davey was a plain child, with a narrow brow and hard mouth. Now he smelt the trout, patted it, chuckled over his capture, then casting down an osier rod, with its hook and a disgorged worm halfway up the gut, he prepared to rush home and display his triumph to his mother. As he climbed up from the stream and reached a little bridge that crossed it, his small face puckered into a fear, for he heard himself called harshly, knew the voice and felt little love for the speaker.

Out of the deepening gloom under the fir trees a young man appeared with a gun under his arm.

"Be that you, Davey, an' did I see a rod? If so, I'll break it in pieces, I warn 'e. Fishin' season ended last Saturday, an' here's the keeper's awn brother poachin'. A nice thing!"

"Oh, Dick! I've caught one! First ever I really caught. Won't mother be brave an' glad to eat un? Ban't very big, but a real trout. I be just takin' it home-along."

"You'll do no such thing, you little rascal. Give it to me this instant moment, or else I'll make you."

Richard Dacombe approached and towered over his brother. It was easy to see that they were near of kin.

"Please, Dick — just this wance — 'tis awnly a li'l tiny feesh — first ever I took, too. An' I swear I'll not feesh no more — honour bright. Please — for mother never won't believe I ackshually caught one if her doan't see it."

"Give it to me, or I'll take it, I tell you, you dirty little thief."

Davey's lip went down. "'Tis a damn, cruel shame. You'm always against me. I wish you was dead, I do. I never knawed no chap in all my days what have got such a beast of a brother as I have."

"Give up that feesh, else I'll throw you in the river, you lazy li'l good-for-nought."

"You'm a gert bully," began the boy; then he fell upon a happy thought, and braced himself to sacrifice his most treasured secret. To let it go into his brother's keeping was bad, but anything seemed better than that his first trout should be lost to him.

"Look 'e here, Richard," he said, "will 'e let me keep this feesh if I tell 'e something terrible coorious 'bout these auld mills?"

The keeper laughed sourly. "A lot more you'm likely to knaw 'bout 'em than I do!"

"Ess fay, I do. 'Tis a wonnerful secret as I found out all to myself, an' never yet told to a single soul. It comes in my games — my Robinson Crusoe game; but I never play that wi' any other chap — not even they boys from Postbridge. I be the only living soul as knaws; an' I'll tell you if you'll let me keep my feesh."

"What's this 'mazin' secret, then?"

"You'll swear?"

"Ess, if the thing be any good."

"Good! I should just reckon 'twas good. Come an' see for yourself — I was awful 'feared at first. Now I doan't care nothin', an' many a time I've took a gert handful an' lighted it, an' seen it go off 'pouf'!"

He led the way to a low building with a dull red roof. It was windowless, but had a door that swung at the will of the wind. This erection was lined inside with matchboarding, and it contained a board of regulations that prohibited all metal within the shed. Even a nail in a boot was unlawful.

"'Tis Case House No. 4 — used once for storing powder," said Richard Dacombe; "that's a pile of sulphur in the corner."

"Ess, but theer's mor'n you can see, Dick. Look here. Another floor lies under this, though nobody minded that, I reckon, else they'd have took what's theer."

Davey moved two boards, and beneath them — dry and sound as when there deposited — he revealed some tons of black blasting powder. His brother started, swore in sudden concern, hastened from the building, and, taking his pipe out of his mouth, carefully extinguished it. Then he returned and accosted Davey.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before, you little fool?”

“Why for should I? ’Twas my gert secret. But you’ll not let it out, will you, Dick? If chaps comed to hear, they’d steal every atom.”

This Richard knew very well.

“I’ll be dumb, and mind that you are,” he said. “And no more playing games with gunpowder. You might have blowed the whole countryside to glory. Keep away in future. If I catch you within a hunderd yards of this place, I’ll lather you.”

“Finding be keeping,” answered Davey, indignantly.

“Perhaps ’tis; an’ might be right. You’ve heard me. That powder’s mine henceforth.”

Davey knew his brother pretty well, but such injustice made him gasp. His small brains worked quickly, and remembering that Richard’s business on the rabbit warren took him far from the powder-mills, the boy held his peace.

This silence, however, angered the bully more

than words. They moved homeward together, and the elder spoke again.

"Now you can just fork out that trout, and be quick about it."

"You promised on your honour!" cried Davey.

"Promises doan't hold wi' poachers."

They were walking from the valley to their home; and the younger, seeing the farm-house door not two hundred yards distant, made a sudden bolt in hope to reach his mother and safety before Dick could overtake him. But he was soon caught and violently flung to the ground.

"Would you, you whelp?"

A blow upon the side of the head dazed the child, and before he could recover or resist, his brother had thrust a rough hand into Davey's pocket, dragged therefrom the little trout, and stamped it to pulp under his heel.

"There — now you go home-along in front of me, you young dog. I'll teach you!"

The boy stood up, muddy, dishevelled, shaking with rage. His eyes shone redly in the setting sunlight; he clenched his little fists, and his frame shook.

"Wait!" he said slowly, with passion strong enough for the moment to arrest his tears. "Wait till I be grawed up. Then 'twill be my turn, an' I'll do 'e all the ill ever I can. You'm a cowardly,

cruel devil to me always, an' I swear I'll pay you back first instant I be strong enough to do it!"

"Get in the house an' shut your rabbit-mouth, or I'll give 'e something to swear for," answered the keeper.

Then his great loss settled heavily upon Davey's soul, and he wept and went home to his mother.

CHAPTER II

RICHARD DACCOMBE visited the little bridge over Cherry-brook yet again after his supper; and in a different mood, beside a different companion, he sat upon the granite parapet. Darkness, fretted with white moonlight, was under the fir trees; the Moor stretched dimly to the hills in one wan featureless waste; an owl cried from the wood, and one shattered chimney towered ghostly grey over the desolation. Quaint black ruins, like hump-backed giants, dotted the immediate distance, and the river twinkled and murmured under the moon, while Dick's pipe glowed, and a girl's voice sounded at his elbow.

"Sweetheart," she said, "why be you so hard with Davey?"

"Leave that, Jane," he answered. "'Tis mother has been at you — as if I didn't know. Little twoad's all the better for licking."

"He's so small, and you'm so big. He do hate you cruel, an' your mother's sore driven between you."

"Mother's soft. The child would grow up a dolt if 'twasn't for me."

"Yet you had no brother to wallop you, Dick."

"Faither was there, wasn't he? I call to mind his heavy hand, and always shall. But if you mean I be a dolt, say it."

"Us all know you'm cleverest man this side of Plymouth."

"Drop it, then, an' tell of something different."

Jane Stanberry did as she was bid: her arms went round Dick's neck, and her lips were pressed against his face. To the girl he represented her greatest experience. Orphaned as a tender child, she had come to Cross Ways farm, in the lonely valley of the powder-mills, and there dwelt henceforth with her mother's kinswoman, Mary Dacombe.

The establishment was small, and a larger company had not found means to subsist upon the hungry new-takes and scanty pasture-lands of Cross Ways. Jonathan Dacombe and his wife, with two hinds, here pursued the hard business of living. Richard was in private service as keeper of White Tor rabbit warren, distant a few miles from his home; and he divided his time between the farm and a little hut of a single chamber, perched in the lonely scene of his labour. Of other children the Dacombes had none living save Davey, though two daughters and another son had entered into life at Cross Ways, pined through brief years there, and so departed. The churchyard, as Jonathan Dac-

combe frankly declared, had been a good friend to him.

Jane was a deep-breasted, rough-haired girl of eighteen. She possessed pale blue eyes, a general large-featured comeliness, and a nature that took life without complaining; and she held herself much blessed in the affection of her cousin Richard. Talk of marriage for them was in the air, but it depended upon an increase of wages for Dick, and his master seemed little disposed to generosity.

The bridge by night was a favourite meeting and parting place for the lovers, because young Dacombe's work in late autumn took him much upon the Moor after dark. The time of trapping was come, and his copper wires glimmered by the hundred along those faintly marked rabbit runs, familiar to experienced eyes alone. These he tended from dusk till dawn, and slept between the intervals of his labour within the little hut already mentioned.

A topic more entertaining than the child Davey now arose; and Jane, whose spirit was romantic, with a sort of romance not bred of her wild home, speculated upon an approaching event that promised some escape from the daily monotony of life at Cross Ways.

"To-morrow he'll actually come," she said. "I've put the finishing touches to his room to-day. What will he be like, Dick?"

"I mind the chap a few years back-along playing foot-ball to Tavistock. A well-set-up youth, 'bout my size, or maybe bigger in the bone. An' he could play foot-ball, no doubt. In fact, a great hand at sporting of all sorts; but work — not likely! Why for should he? He'll have oceans of money when his faither dies."

"Your mother reckons 'tis all moonshine 'bout his coming to Cross Ways to learn farming. She says that he'm sent here to keep him out of mischief — for same reason as powder-mills was sent here. He'll ride about, an' hunt, an' shoot, for sartain. But he won't never take sensible to work — so your mother reckons."

"Maybe he won't; but faither be going to get two pound a week by him; so what he does ban't no great odds, so long as he bides."

"Would you call him a gen'leman?"

"Gentle is as gentle does. Us shall see."

"Wi' book-larnin', no doubt?"

"Little enough, I fancy. Nought but a fool goes farmin' in these days."

"Yet 'tis our hope, I'm sure," objected Jane. "Please God, Dick, us will be able to take a little farm down in the country some day — won't us?"

"In the country — yes; but not 'pon this wilderness."

There was silence between them again, while the

owl hooted and the river scattered silver in the rushes and babbled against the granite bridge.

"Wonder what colour the chap's eyes be, Dick?"

"They'll be black if I hear much more about him," he answered shortly. "For I'll darken both first day he comes here — just to show how we stand."

"You're jealous afore you've seed him!"

"An' you're a blamed sight too hungry to see him. Best drop him. He won't be nought to you, I s'pose?"

"How can you be so sharp, Dick? Ban't it natural a gal what leads such a wisht life as me should think twice of a new face — an' a gen'leman, too?"

"Anthony Maybridge have got one enemy afore he shows his nose here; and you're to thank for it."

Jane laughed. "Then I know what to expect when we'm married, I s'pose. But no call for you to be afeared! If he was so butivul as Angel Gabriel he'd be nought to me. Kiss me same as I kissed you just now."

But Dick was troubled. His clay pipe also drew ill, and he dashed it into the water. "Damn kissing!" he said; "I'm sick of it. Get home, an' let me go to work."

"The young man will like you better than me, when all's said, dear heart; for you'll give him best sport of anybody in these parts."

He grunted, and left her without more words;

while she, familiar with his sulky moods, showed no particular regret. To the hills he strode away, and the misty marshes swallowed up sight of him, while he threaded his road through the bogs, climbed great stony slopes under the hilltop, and reached his warren. But bad fortune stuck close to Richard that night, for of two fine rabbits snared since sundown, nothing remained but the heads.

Foxes, however, are sacred upon Dartmoor, even in the warrens; though, if evil language could have hurt them, it must have gone ill with a vixen and five brave cubs, whose home was hard by in the granite bosom of White Tor.

CHAPTER III

ANTHONY MAYBRIDGE arrived at Cross Ways, and amongst the various items of his luggage he was only concerned for his gun-case. Mrs. Dacombe greeted the youth with old-time courtesy, and her husband soon perceived that the newcomer would be a pupil in little more than name. Anthony, indeed, made an energetic start, and for the space of a full week resolutely dogged the farmer's footsteps; but his enterprise sprang from a whim rather than a fixed enthusiasm. On the spur of the moment, before various alternatives, he had decided upon farming; but the impulse toward that life waned, and in a month the lad found Richard Dacombe's society much more congenial than that of his taciturn parent. Good store of snipe and plover were now upon the Moor, and they drew young Maybridge more surely than the business of manuring hay lands or getting in the mangel-wurzel crop. With Dick, indeed, he struck into close fellowship, founded on the basis of the gun; and with Jane Stanberry he also became more friendly than anybody but herself was aware. Socially, Maybridge stood separated from his host by the accident of success alone.

Dacombe and Anthony's father were old acquaintances, and the latter, a prosperous nurseryman at Tavistock, sometimes fell in with his friend when the hounds met at the powder-mills.

The boy found Jane sympathetic, and being possessed of a warm heart but little sense, he soon revealed to her the true cause of his present life and temporary banishment from home.

"If you can believe it," he said, when she met him returning from a day with the snipe in the bogs, — "if you can believe it, I shall be surprised. I always thought a man ought to look up to women as the soul of truth and all that. I was engaged — secretly; and there was another chap I hardly knew by sight even; and that girl was playing with me — like you play with a hooked fish; the only difference being she didn't want to land me. In fact, I was the bait, if you understand such a blackguard thing, and she fished with me and caught the other chap. I could mention names, but what's the use?"

"How horrid!" said Jane. "I'm sure I'd very much rather not know who 'twas."

"Well, anyway, the other chap took the bait. And the moment she got him she threw me over. *After we were engaged*, mind you! And the rum thing is, looking at it from a mere worldly point of view, that I shall be worth tons more money than that chap ever will be."

"She didn't really care about you, then?"

"I suppose not, though I would have taken my dying oath she did. And after the frightful blow of being chucked, I tried to hide the effect, but couldn't, owing to going right off my feed — especially breakfasts. My mother spotted that, and taxed me with being ill — a thing I never have been in my life. So I had to confess to her what a frightful trial I'd been through, and she told the governor."

"I'm sure they must have been very sad about it, for your sake."

"Not half as much as you would have thought; though many chaps have been utterly smashed up body and soul and gone into a consumption of the lungs for less. But it came as a bit of a shock to my people, because, you see, I'd never mentioned it, and — well, the girl was in a tobacconist's shop, and my governor hates tobacco; which made it worse, though very unfair it should. Anyway, it shows what girls are."

"And shows what fathers are, seemingly."

"Yes; though how my governor, whose grandfather himself went out working in other people's gardens, could object to a girl who had pluck enough to earn her own living, I don't know. I had a furious row about it, until he pointed out that, as she had chucked me, it was not much good quarrelling with him about her. Which was true. Nobody

but you has really understood what a knock-down thing it was. I'm an atheist now — simply owing to that woman; I don't believe in a single thing. I said all girls were the same till I met you. Still, I feel as bitter as a lemon when I think much about it. But you're different, I can see that."

"You'll feel happier come presently."

"I am happier already — in a way, because I find all women are not like that. You and Mrs. Dacombe have done me a lot of good, especially you."

"Sure I be gay and proud to think so," said Jane.

"To promise and then change! Why, it's contrary to human nature, I should think," declared the ingenuous Anthony. But Jane Stanberry did not reply; she had reached a point in her own experience of life that indicated the possibility of such a circumstance.

Young Maybridge was pleasant to see, and, as cynical chance would have it, his gifts, both physical and mental, were of a sort to shine conspicuous from the only contrast at hand. Dick Dacombe had a face of true Celtic cast, that might have been handsome, but was spoiled by an expression generally surly and always mean. His character became more distrustful and aggressive as he grew older, and the suspicious nature of him looked specially ill before Anthony's frankness and simplicity. The latter was fair, with open, Saxon type of counte-

nance. His good temper overcame all Richard's jealousy from the first, but the keeper envied Anthony's extra inch and a half of height and greater weight of shoulder, though he himself was the closer knit of the two.

For a period of weeks all went well between the young men, and their increasing intimacy argued ill for Anthony's progress toward practical knowledge in agriculture. This Jonathan Dacombe understood, but held it no concern of his. It happened that the farmer came home one day just in time to see his son and his pupil departing from Cross Ways together. An expression of contempt touched with slight amusement lighted his grey face, and he turned to Jane Stanberry, who stood at the door.

"Like the seed 'pon stony ground," he said. "Comed up wi' a fine blade an' full o' nature, then withered away, 'cause there wasn't no good holding stuff behind. A farmer! However, there's no call he should be. He'm here to learn to forget, not to farm."

"He is forgetting so fast as he can," declared the girl. "He's got nought to say nowadays 'bout the wickedness of women and such-like; an' he went to church wi' mother an' me 'essterday to Postbridge, an' singed the psalms an' hymns wi' a fine appetite, I'm sure. His voice be so deep as a cow when he uplifts it."

"I reckon he'm getting over his trouble too quick for my liking," answered Mr. Dacombe. "My bird will be off some fine mornin' when shooting be over and their's nought more for him to kill."

Meantime, while Jane spoke with admiration of Anthony's good qualities, and Mrs. Dacombe heard her indignantly, young Maybridge himself was similarly angering another member of the Dacombe family. Now he stood with Dick upon the lofty crown of Higher White Tor, and watched a flock of golden plover newly come to their winter quarters from some northern home. They flew and cried at a great height above the marshes, wheeled and warped in the clear blue of a December sky; and when simultaneously they turned, there was a flash as of a hundred little stars, where the sunlight touched the plumage of their breasts and underwings. But they were bound for a region beyond the range of the sportsmen who watched them; soon, indeed, the birds dwindled into dots, that made a great > upon the sky; and as they flew, they constantly renewed that figure.

"Pity," said Anthony. "Off to the middle of the Moor. Haven't got a shot at a golden plover yet. Miss Jane's favourite bird, too, so she says."

"No call for you to trouble about that. If she eats all I've shot for her, she'll do very well."

"You're a lucky devil, Dick."

"That's as may be."

"Always the way with chaps like you, who never had anything to do but ask and get 'yes' for an answer. You don't know when you're well off in these parts."

Richard laughed without much merriment.

"There's so good fish in the sea as ever come out of it," he said. "I'd not break my heart for any girl."

"A chap in love to say such a cold-blooded thing!"

"We're not all froth and splutter, like you."

"Nor yet ice, like you, I should hope. You're engaged to the prettiest girl I've ever seen in my life, and the best; and you take it as if it was your right instead of your frightfully good luck. It's only because you don't know the world that you are so infernally complacent about her, Richard. If you knew all that I do —"

The other sneered in a tone of levity. "A wonderful lady's man you — by all accounts! But don't think I'm afeared of you. Might have been jealous afore you comed — not since."

Anthony grew red as the dead asphodel foliage under his feet in the bogs.

"That's as much as to say I'm a fool."

"Why so? It's as much as to say you're honest — that's all."

"That wasn't what you meant when you spoke.

You were laughing because you know you are sharper than I am. You may be, but you're not sharp enough to know your luck. You've told me pretty plainly what I am; now I'll tell you what you are — a good shot and a good sportsman all round, but no other good that I can see. You think a jolly sight too much of yourself to make a good husband, anyway. If Jane realised —”

“Mind your awn business!” thundered out the other, “and keep her name off your tongue henceforward. D’you think I doan’t know her a million times better than you do? D’you think us wants lessons from you after all these years, you —”

“I can make you angry, then, though I am a born fool?”

“Yes, you can; an’ you damn soon will if you’m not more careful of your speech. I doan’t want to take law in my own hands an’ give you a thrashing; but that’ll I do if you touch this matter again. Who are you, to tell me my duty to my maiden?”

“As to what you’ll do or won’t do,” answered Maybridge, growing very rosy again, “there’s two sides to that. I’d have asked you to box weeks ago, only I’m taller and heavier, and I thought you would think it unsportsmanlike. But now — when you please. As for Miss Jane, I shall speak to her, and see her, and go to church with her just as often

as she'll let me, without asking leave from you or anybody. So now you know."

Anthony swung off over the Moor, and Richard, pursuing the way to his hut on the shoulder of the tor, let the other depart unanswered. This sudden and unexpected breach rather pleased the keeper. He had always held Anthony to be a fool, and the fact seemed now proved beyond further dispute. It was not until he had lived through the loneliness of a long day and night upon the warren that the young man viewed his situation differently. Then three harpies — wrath, resentment and a natural jealousy — sprang full-fledged into being, and drove him home before them.

As for Maybridge, smarting under a sense of insult and a worse sense that he deserved it, the young man strove to excuse himself to his conscience. He assured himself many times that Richard Dacombe was unworthy of Jane Stanberry in every possible respect. And there came a day when he told her that he thought so.

CHAPTER IV

MARY DACCOMBE was wont to reserve the problems of the working day until nightfall; and her husband solved them as best he could during those brief minutes that intervened between the extinction of the candle and his first snore. An honest but unsentimental man, love for his offspring had never particularly marked his mind. He was contented that his sons should quarrel, and that Dick should thrash Davey when he felt so disposed, for it saved him the trouble. He held that each did the other good, and he had neither pity nor particular regard to spare for either.

This cheerless fact now appeared, for on a night soon after Christmas, Mrs. Dacombe approached her husband upon a matter of sentiment, and won colder comfort from him than she expected. He gave her an obvious opportunity to approach the subject, otherwise it is doubtful whether she would have had the courage to do so. That day, to the farmer's astonishment and gratification, Anthony Maybridge had come back from a brief Christmas vacation. The holiday extended over a fortnight, and Dacombe fully believed that he had seen the

last of his pupil; but Anthony returned, declared a renewed interest in matters agricultural, and gave the farmer to understand that he should continue to reside at Cross Ways for the present.

Now Jonathan laughed as he stretched himself on his bed; he laughed, and wondered what had brought young Maybridge again to the Moor. Whereupon his wife read him the riddle.

"Not you, nor yet the work, nor yet the shooting," she said. "'Tis right as you should know, however, for trouble's brewing, if I can see, an' 'tis our awn son will smart for it."

"Us have all got to smart off an' on, though how that moon-calf of a boy be going to hurt Dick or Davey, I can't tell."

"Not Davey, though 'twas him as found it out, I reckon. Davey be venomous against his brother — always was, worse luck. Dick rubs it into the bwoy, and his brother hurts him with bitter mouth-speech when he can. 'Tis this way: that young gen'leman be getting a deal too fond of Jane Stanberry by the looks of it. That's what he's comed back for, I reckon. Davey spat it out essterday when Dick clouted his head. Her wasn't theer, so the boy up an' said as Dick's temper would weary the Dowl, an' that Jane was looking away from him to a better. Lucky I was by, else Dick would have done the li'l un a mischief. He growed thunder-black, yet

I could see by his wrath be knowed the tale were more than Davey's spite."

"Them two takes after your family, mother, an' no mistake. Yet I hope they won't turn gaol-birds, or else weak in their intellects."

The woman felt the tears in her weary eyes. She wiped them away, and turned in bed.

"They'm as God made 'em, master; please Him they'll be better friends come Davey grows up. But what must us do?"

"Do? Nought."

"Surely you've got your son's good at heart? Think what 'tis for Dick to see that wicked girl coolin', coolin', by inches. Gall for him, poor dear."

But the man only laughed sleepily. "Strongest wins in this world. If Richard ban't stout enough to keep his woman by his own arts, us can't help him."

"You might send this young chap 'bout his business."

"An' fling away two pound a week? No, fay! Girls is easier picked up than two pound a week. Let Dick do what's in him. He ban't 'feard of that slack-twisted, yellow-haired chap, be he? Let him show the maiden which is the better man, an' not come bleating to his mother, like a hungry lamb to a ewe."

"He never comed hisself."

"Well, what's to hinder him from using his fistes? Nought brings a man down in a girl's eyes like a good hiding. Let 'em settle it same way as the tom-cats do."

"I do b'lieve your heart be made o' moor stone."

"Good job if 'twas. Ban't no use being built o' putty, nor yet o' pity, 'pon Dartymoor. Now shut your clack, an' let me go to sleep."

The woman sighed, and closed her eyes.

"I'll tell Dick what you say. Good night, master."

CHAPTER V

ANTHONY MAYBRIDGE had in truth discovered that everything depends upon the point of view. What was a deed past understanding in one woman, appeared to him quite defensible for another. He had grown into a very steady admiration of Jane Stanberry, and he told himself that her attachment to the warrener was a serious error. This he firmly believed, apart from the other question of his personal regard for Jane. He discussed the matter with a grand impartiality, and felt confident that her future must be ruined if shared with such a surly and cross-grained churl as Richard Dacombe.

Presently he expressed the same fear to Jane herself, and she was much astonished to find no great indignation flame up in her mind before such a proposition. She confessed the thought had occurred to her, and asked Anthony how it could have struck him also. Whereupon he declared that his suspicion was awakened solely from disinterested regard for her welfare and future happiness. In brief, a situation stale enough developed, with that brisk growth to be observed in all similar complications when they are exhibited by primitive natures.

Such seeds grow in virgin and uncultured hearts with a rapidity not manifest where the subjects are sophisticated and bound about with the etiquette of their order.

Jane Stanberry observed the radical differences between these men; she found Dick's cloudy spirit and gloomy nature grow daily darker by contrast with the generous and sanguine temperament of Anthony. Indeed, Richard did grow more morose, as was to be expected, while he watched such a play develop and apparently stood powerless as any other spectator to change the plot of it.

But at last his sense of wrong pricked passion, and he stirred himself. Most firmly he believed all fault lay with Maybridge alone, and he attributed to that youth a guile and subtlety quite beyond his real powers of mind. Dick accused his rival of having seduced the love of Jane against her inner will — a thing obviously not possible; and upon that judgement he prepared to act.

For her part, the girl let conscience sting until the stab grew dull and failed to disturb her comfort. Each exhibition of ferocity from Richard lessened her uneasiness, and justified her in her own eyes. She plotted to meet the other man in secret; yet still she played a double part, and outwardly pretended that Dick was all in all to her.

So stood things when Mary Dacombe spoke to

her son; and his father's advice seemed good to the man, and chimed very harmoniously with personal desire, for he had reached a point where he itched to bruise and batter his adversary. Chance helped him in his ambition, and a discovery fired him to instant force of arms.

Returning home from the Moor upon a night when it was supposed that he meant to stop in his hut on the warren, Richard came through the ruins, and was astonished to see a light glimmering from the silent desolation. It had grown late on a cold, moonlit night in late January, and nothing could have been more unexpected than the presence of any human being in the old powder-mills at such a time. Supposing that he had surprised his brother Davey, Dick crept silently to the spot, and presently discovered that the brightness gleamed in two bars set at a right angle, and flashed from behind the door of a ruin. The place was windowless, but the ill-fitting entrance revealed a flame within. Richard recognised the building as Case House No. 4, and at once associated the intruder with his brother. Even as he did so, his heart beat faster at the thought of danger — not to Davey, but himself. Creeping closer, however, voices reached him, and he discovered that Anthony Maybridge and Jane Stanberry were there together.

Tingling with passion, he had some ado to keep

from kicking in the door and bursting upon them; but he desisted, and with an effort crept away to reflect. Almost immediately upon his departure he heard them following, so he turned and met them not far from the little bridge.

"A fine night for a walk wi' another man's girl," he said, suddenly appearing out of darkness and standing in the way of the guilty pair. "You thought I was out of hearing, no doubt, as you've thought often enough of late, I'll swear, when I was closer than you reckoned. For two pins I'd blow your fool's head off your shoulders."

Jane shrank back, and Maybridge stammered and stuttered.

"That's not the way to talk," he said.

"Talk! God's truth, I ban't here to talk — I leave that for you. What be you doing wi' my maid these many days? Tell me that!"

"I will. I'm glad of this. I've felt an awful brute lately; but you'll make me feel better in a minute. I've been telling Jane that she's making a big mistake to marry you. It's my honest opinion, and I ought to have told you."

"Honest! Wonder the word doan't choke you, you gert, hulking, lazy clown! Behind a man's back to do it! Thief that you be."

"Not at all. I've never hidden from Jane —"

"Shut your mouth, you hookem-snivey fox, or

I'll hammer your white teeth down your throat! Stand up to me, now this instant moment, an' us'll see who's the best man. 'Tis time this here woman knowed, an' I'll show her the straw you'm made of, for all your size."

He flung down his gun and his coat, then turned up his sleeves and waited.

"We can't fight before a girl — impossible," said Anthony.

"Doan't she want us to? Ban't she hungry to see us do it? Ban't she a female, like the rest of 'em? Come on, or I'll beat you like a dog."

"What's the good of making an exhibition of yourself, Richard? I was 'runner-up' in the amateur heavy-weights two years running. I can smother you, but I don't want to."

"Doan't blow so loud afore you see what 'tis to fight a chap in the right," cried Richard, with passion.

So we shift our standpoint at the beck of chance, and call virtue to our aid when accidentally enrolled under her banner. He stood where he had lied to his little brother and trampled Davey's fish into the ground and laughed at the child's rage.

"You'd better go," said Maybridge to Jane. "I'm awfully sorry about this, but —"

He was cut short, for the other rushed in and struck him a heavy blow on the side of the face. Anthony shook his head and snorted.

"If you will have it, you shall," he said; "but I'm sorry, because you're right and I'm in the wrong — more or less."

Jane fled at the first blow, and the battle began. Maybridge quickly proved the looseness of his great limbs was combined with other gifts proper to a boxer. He smarted doubly; from the other's insults and from the sense that they were deserved. He had ill-used Richard, and his dislike for him, once loosened, was proportionately bitter.

Stung thus, the young man let his strength and skill have vent. He took and gave some punishment, but he was a disciplined fighter, and very easily kept out the heavy rushes of the keeper. Then, at the first opportunity which Richard offered, Maybridge knocked him squarely off his legs with a tremendous blow over the heart. He rose slowly, but the edge of his strength was gone. His anger nearly blinded him before this reverse, while Anthony, on the other hand, had fought himself into a good humour. Presently at close quarters he hit rather low, and Dick cursed him.

"Fight fair, you devil!" he gasped.

"Fair enough," puffed the other. "Well up on your small ribs — you'll see the mark in the morning."

By mutual consent they rested presently; then the battle was renewed, and, knowing himself

beaten at every point of the game, Richard Dacombe let his temper loose and fell to fighting like a dog rather than a man. Now it was the other's turn to cry caution; but the keeper had no ears — he only lusted to do injury. Once Maybridge might have knocked him out of time, but he desisted; then, angered by a brutal kick on the calf of the leg, he got inside Dick's arms, clenched, gripped the smaller man like a bear, and with a cross buttock hurled him heavily backward. They had fought to the river's bank, and now, luckily for the looser's neck, he fell into the water. He struggled to his feet, and stood a moment where moonlight played upon the foaming stream. Then he crawled to the bank, and had scarcely strength to climb it. There he lay panting for some time. Anthony brought him his coat, and offered to give him an arm home; but Dick declined, and getting on to his feet with difficulty, walked along beside his conqueror.

"This is the beginning," he said — "not the end. If you don't leave Cross Ways before the week's out, you never will — not alive."

"Don't talk rot like that. I thought you were a good sportsman anyway, but I see you're not; and that's the worst you can say against any man. I was going — God's my judge that I'm telling you the truth — I was going away to-morrow — for a

time, at any rate. She wished it. But now — now you threaten me as if you were a murderer, I shan't move, not an inch. And if there's any blackguardly attempt on your part to do me an injury, I'll break your neck, Dacombe; so now you're warned. Anyway, you have shown that I was right, for any girl would be a madwoman to marry such a lunatic."

"Talk on, now, if you've got the wind to do it," answered Richard, "but the last word will be mine."

CHAPTER VI

A BLACK malignity dominated the beaten man after his reverse; and, inasmuch as Jane Stanberry, now at the cross ways of her life, fell from honour and played a base part out of fear, her lover continued to believe that his enemy alone was responsible for Jane's weakness. He blamed the girl, but his love did not diminish, and he still supposed that Anthony Maybridge once removed, she would return to him with eyes that again saw clearly. He attributed his conqueror's conduct to a tremendous strength of purpose, whereas mere feebleness and an amorous nature were responsible for it. The woman was at least as guilty as the man; and now an added blame belonged to her, for while Anthony henceforth openly declared himself the rival of Richard, she held the balance a little longer between them — chiefly from fear of Mrs. Dacombe. Her decision was made, yet very carefully she concealed it, and Richard continued in error.

From his mistaken conclusion, and smarting still with venom bred of the wounds Anthony had inflicted, the keeper proceeded to a criminal deed.

Such active hatred as he now felt stuck at nothing, and within a fortnight of his reverse came the evil inspiration that he waited for.

A veiled antagonism reigned between the men after their battle; then matters seemed to sink into customary course. Richard absented himself from home more than usual; Anthony abandoned shooting, and took to hunting instead.

Once more it happened that the warrener saw a light burning in No. 4 Case House by night, and, passing by, heard Maybridge within, whistling to pass the time until Jane's arrival. Richard slunk by awhile, and presently, like a ghost, Jane flitted past him. A flash of light fell upon the waste as she opened the door; then all grew dark again. Still the wronged lover remained within earshot, and accident killed his sudden gust of passion against the girl, for he heard a sob and listened to a weak, vain protest from her against the double part she was constrained to play. She accused Anthony of drawing her to him against all honour and right feeling; whereupon the listener departed, not desirous to hear more, and confirmed in his belief.

He visited the old Case House in the middle of the next day, and ground his teeth at sight of a rough carving—two hearts with familiar initials beneath them. Then he examined the concealed

blasting powder, and surveyed its position with respect to the main walls of the building. Satisfied of this, he proceeded into the air, took a heavy clasp knife, dug down a foot beneath the grass and turf and removed two bricks from the foundation of the Case House. Within them was a thin layer of concrete; the matchboarding followed; and then came the gunpowder. Calculating the exact spot of his excavation, Richard entered the hut and pursued his work from inside, after carefully moving the powder beyond reach of any spark that might be struck from his attack on the concrete. With light, numerous blows he gained his end, and soon had a clean hole running from beneath the magazine to the ground outside. This he filled with gunpowder, replaced the mass of the explosive above it, returned the bricks to their original positions, and covered up the space outside with turf and dry fern.

A scrap of touchwood and a match would do all the rest.

Richard Dacombe completed his preparations just in time, for as he moved away to the Moor, he saw his brother Davey in the valley. Thereupon Dick hid behind a rock to surprise the youngster unpleasantly should his goal be the Case House. But Davey had either seen his brother, or knew that he was not far distant. At least, he showed

himself too wary to run any risk, and pursued an innocent matter of climbing a pine tree for a wood-pigeon's nest. Nor did he come down again until Richard had gone upon his way to the warren.

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CHAPTER VII

EVENTS by no means conspired to shake the keeper's evil determination. Lulled to fancied security and a belief that his indifference indicated a change of mind toward her, Jane continued her attention to Dick; and he abstained from upbraiding her, for he took this display to be love, and felt more than ever assured that, Maybridge once out of the way, the girl would waken as from a dream to the reality of his regard and worship. Her conduct, indeed, obscured his own affection, but he came of a class that takes life and its tender relations callously. The only ardent and worthy emotion that had ever made his heart throb quicker was this girl. His love was still alive, nor could anger kill it while he continued blind to the truth that she no longer cared for him.

A fortnight after his visit to the Case House, Dick descended by night from his den upon the high moor, and the dim flicker of a flame he had long desired to see strung his nerves to steel. For fulfilment of his plan it was necessary that he should come pat on the interval between the arrival of Anthony Maybridge at this tryst and Jane's subse-

quent approach. Twice he had been too late; to-night he arrived in time, and his opportunity waited for him. Maybridge was alone. The light burnt in silence. Then came a solitary footfall on the hollow floor above the gunpowder.

Dacombe had calculated every action that would combine to complete and perfect the deed now before him. Nor had he disdained to consider the result. No witness could rise up against him; his enemy would be blown out of physical existence, and his own subsequent declaration that some tons of blasting powder remained forgotten in the old magazine must serve to explain the rest. A spark from Anthony's pipe would be a satisfactory solution.

The man set about his murder swiftly and stealthily. He had already driven a heavy staple into the door of the Case House, and now, without a sound, he fastened his victim firmly in, using some lengths of brass rabbit wire for the purpose. Then he crept down below the level of the building, scratched away the turf and fern and moved the loosened bricks. He felt the powder dry under his hand, brought a large lump of rotten wood from his breast pocket, where he had long carried it, and struck a match. Soon the touchwood glowed, and he set it down, leapt from his work and hastened away along the path by which Jane must presently ap-

proach. Thus he designed to intercept her progress, and, upon some pretence or excuse, draw her from the zone of danger. As to that last point, however, he was doubtful. The amount of the powder he could not accurately tell, and the extent of the explosion remained to be seen. Richard calculated that three minutes, if not a longer period, must elapse before fire would gnaw up the dead wood and reach the powder; and now, as he moved hastily away, the seconds lengthened into minutes, and the minutes most horribly dragged. An infinite abyss of time widened out between the deed and its effect. He lived his life again; and still he peered through the darkness with his eyes, and strained upon the silence with his ears, that he might not let Jane Stanberry pass him and go ignorantly to destruction.

He was a quarter of a mile from the Case House, when it seemed as though the heavens were opened and Doomsday suddenly loosed upon the world. An awful and withering explosion swept the glen like a storm. First there leapt aloft a pillar of pale fire, that rose and spread as the eruption of a volcano spreads. The terrific glare painted long miles of the Moor, and, like the hand of lightning, revealed the shaggy crowns of the tors on many a distant hill; while, long before its livid sheaf of flame had sunk, came such a crash and bellow of

sound as might burst from the upheaval of a world in earthquake. Upon this appalling detonation a wave of air swept in sudden tempest. Richard was blown off his feet and dashed to the ground; and as he fell, the hills echoed back the explosion in crashing reverberations that rolled out of the darkness, rose and fell, and rose again, until, after a hundred repetitions flung hither and thither over the peaks of the land, they sank through a growling diminuendo into silence. And the silence was terrific by contrast with the awful clamour it succeeded, even as the darkness was intense that followed upon such an unwonted and far-flung glare of light.

Richard Dacombe got upon his feet, and the tinkle of broken glass was in his ears, with the murmur of affrighted voices; for the concussion had shattered nearly every pane at Cross Ways, and mightily alarmed the dwellers there.

When he reached home the young keeper found his parents already out-of-doors, with the whole household assembled about them.

Mary Dacombe praised God at sight of her son uninjured.

"'Tis the end of the world, by the sound of it," she said. "Where be Davey to?"

His father questioned Richard, and the man declared his ignorance of all particulars.

"An explosion at the old powder-mills, or else a bolt from heaven," he answered. "I must have passed by the very place, I reckon, not five minutes before the upstore."

"A thunder-planet, for sartain," declared an ancient soul, whose few teeth chattered between his words. "I can call home when a com-com-comet was reigning fifty years an' more agone, an' 'twas just such open weather as us have had o' late."

Mr. Dacombe felt anxious for his stock in certain byres and cow-houses that lay to the west of the powder-mills. But first he held up a lantern and counted the company.

"Be us all here?" he asked.

"Davey's out somewheers," answered his wife; "ess, an' Jane Stanberry be —" She broke off, and looked at the farmer.

"Down-long, I s'pose," he said carelessly; then he turned to Richard. "Us can't blink these meetings between 'em, Dick. Best man wins where a maid's the prize; or which she thinks be the best. Awnly God send her ban't in the powder-mills to-night."

"'Tis most certain she be," answered Mary Dacombe. "Her didn't know as the young man — Mr. Maybridge — was called off sudden to Moreton to serve 'pon a committee for the Hunt Dinner next month. A chap rode out, and he saddled his

mare hisself and galloped off wi' him directly after he'd ate his meat."

"Jane didn't know?" asked Richard.

"No, she went out counting to find him, I'm afraid."

"An' he'm at Moreton?"

The man asked in a voice so strange that none failed to note it, even in this dark moment of fear and turmoil.

"Her went to wait for him usual place, no doubt," said Jonathan Dacombe. "Us had better come an' look around for her, an' Davey too — not to name the things in the long byre by the wood."

A hideous cry suddenly cut Jonathan short, for a storm had swept the sinner's brain upon these words. He saw what he had done, and the shock overset the balance of his mind.

"Come!" he cried; "I've killed her, I've ended her days in a scatter of blood and flesh! Nought to show for the butivul round body of her now. But her shall have Christian burial, if 'tis awnly a hair of her head left to put in the churchyard; an' I'll mourn for her on my knees, afore they string me up!"

"God's goodness! what gabble be this?" asked his father.

"And Maybridge still alive, wi' no smell of fire about him. I'll — I'll —"

He broke off and gazed round him wildly.

"Upon the Moreton road as he comes home-along!" he said. Then the wretch turned to hurry away. At the first step, however, he stopped and stood as still as a statue, for he had heard what was hidden from the ears of the rest. Then they too caught the sound of footsteps and a murmuring in the night. Richard remained without moving, and his eyes glared into the dark, and his jaw had fallen. Then, taking shape and coming slowly into the radius of lantern light, there moved a woman and a boy.

Jane Stanberry approached, holding Davey by the hand; and at sight of her Richard Dacombe screamed out his shattered senses, and fled as one possessed of an evil spirit. In vain they made search for him by night and day, and it was not until more than eight-and-forty hours had passed that they found him wandering in the great central loneliness insane. There they ministered to him, and brought him home; and time so dealt with him that he sank into a harmless and haunted idiotcy — a horror for his father, a knife in his mother's heart.

Now it happened that Richard's brother, upon the keeper's departure from the Case House on a day already noted, had descended from his pine tree, made close investigation of the elder's deed, and guessed that such preparations were directed

against one man. From that day until the time of the catastrophe, David kept silent watch upon all occasions when Jane and Anthony Maybridge met there. Hidden within a dry drain some ten yards distant, he had played sentinel until the night of Richard's revenge. Then he had crept from his cover the moment the other's back was turned, reached the smouldering touchwood, and with amazing courage extinguished it. Afterward, releasing the girl as quickly as possible, and bidding her run for her life to the shelter of a grinding mill two hundred yards distant, he had once more set the rotten wood on fire and hastened after Jane.

She, mystified and indignant, was also conscious that the boy must be obeyed, and so fled as he ordered her. Yet both would have perished but for their protection behind the stout ruin of the grinding mill. And now, the fear of death upon their faces, they hurried trembling home, and Nemesis came with them.

* * * * *

To-day a black-bearded man, with brown eyes and a mouth always open, shambles about the blasted heart of the old powder-mill. He babbles to himself with many a frown and pregnant nod and look askance; sometimes he watches the trout in the river; sometimes he plucks feverishly at the blossoms of the broom and spearwort and other

yellow flowers. These he stamps underfoot as one stamps fire. Davey is his brother's keeper, and shall be seen always at hand. At his word Richard Dacombe obeys like a dog—shrinks with fear if the boy is angry, fawns and laughs when the boy is kind.



JOSEPH

JOSEPH

"I do love they stuckit plants," said Mr. Joseph Hannaford.

He waved his hands toward some lettuces of a fat figure and plump proportions.

"Doan't want no work — that's why," answered Matthew Smallridge. "The straggly sort be better, but they axes for tying up an' trouble."

"Ezacally so. An' a man as goes out of his way to sow trouble be a fule, Matthew," retorted Joseph, triumphantly.

The gardeners met every day, and every day differed on affairs of horticulture and life. Joseph was stout, with a red face set in a white frill of whisker. He had a rabbit mouth, a bald brow and a constitutional capacity for idleness. He talked much. He had a fine theory that we do not leave enough to nature in matters of the garden.

Mr. Smallridge, the squire's gardener, enjoyed a different habit of body and mind. He was a man who lived for work and loved it; he read the journals proper to his business; he kept his subordinates to their labours from morn till eve; and idleness he loathed as the worst sin to be laid at

the door of any agriculturist, great or small. Mr. Hannaford alleged that the literature of his business was desirable for beginners, but he declared it to be unnecessary in his case. If asked concerning his authorities, he would tap his forehead and say, "Books? I don't want no books. 'Tis all here." No man possessed sure proofs that he could either read or write.

These two were ancient men, yet not old for Dartmoor, where those of hardy stock, who have weathered the ordeal of infancy, usually advance far into the vale of years before their taking off. Joseph attributed his excellent health and spirits to a proper sense of what was due to himself in the matter of rest; while Matthew, on the other hand, assigned his physical and mental prosperity to hard work and temperance. Now the men stood together in Joseph's little garden and discussed general questions.

"If us was all your way of thinking, theer'd be no progress, an' never a new pea growed an' never a new potato taken to a show," said Mr. Small-ridge.

"I hate shows," answered Joseph. "'Tis flying in the face of nature an' God Almighty, all this struggling for size. If He'd a' meant to grow twenty peas in a pod, an' all so big as cherries, He'd have done it wi' a turn o' the wrist. He didn't do

it, an' for us worms to try an' go awver the Lord in the matter of garden-stuff be so bad as bad can be. 'Twas touching that very thing I fell out with the Reverend Truman. 'I be gwaine to show grapes, Joseph,' he said to me last year; an' I nodded an' said, 'Ess, sir,' an' went my even way. Us didn't show. Then 'twas chrysanth. Weern't satisfied wi' a nice, small, stuggy bloom, as nature meant, but must be pinching, an' potting, an' messing with soot an' dirt, an' watering twice a day — ten months' toil for two months' pleasure. Then what? A gert, ramshackly, auld blossom, like a mop dipped in a pail o' paint. However, I let his reverence do the work, an' what credit was about I got myself. Not that I wanted it."

"As true a Christian your master was as ever walked in a garden, however," declared Mr. Smallridge. "I hope the new parson will prove so gude."

"I be gwaine to see him this very day," answered Joseph. "'Tis my hope he'll take me on to the vicarage, for the place wouldn't be the place without me up theer. I knaw every blade of grass an' gooseberry bush in it — a very butivul kitchen-garden 'tis too."

"An' well out of sight of the sitting-room windows," said Matthew Smallridge, grimly.

"As a kitchen-garden should be," assented Joseph. "Gude times they was," he continued, "an'

I only hopes the Reverend Truman have got such a fine garden an' such a' honest man in it as he had here."

"But no li'l maid to go round with him, poor soul!"

"A bright child his darter was. Impatient also — like youth ever is. Her'd bring me plants to coddle, an' expect me to waste my precious time looking after her rubbish. Then a thing would be struck for death, along of want of water or what not, an' her'd come to me wi' her li'l face all clouded. 'Can't 'e make it well again, Joseph?' her'd say; an' I'd say, 'No, missy; 'tis all up wi' thicky geranium,' or whatever 'twas. "'Tis gwaine home.' An' her'd stamp her li'l foot so savage an' ferocious, an' say, 'But it *mustn't* go home! I don't *want* it to go home! 'Tis your business not to let it go home!' Poor little maiden!"

"An' now she've gone home herself."

"Ess. She didn't mean to be rude to an auld man. But of course I couldn't be bothered with such trash. As to watering, I always leave it to Nature. Who be us that we should know better what things want than her do?"

"Nature caan't water green stuff onder glass, can her?"

"No; then why put it onder glass? All this here talk 'bout glass houses is vanity an' flying in the face of Providence. If 'twas meant that grapes

an' tree-ferns an' 'zaleas an' hothouse stuff was to flourish in England, they'd be here doing of it on every mountain-side. Us takes too much 'pon ourselves. Same with prayers. What be prayer most times but trying to get the A'mighty round to our way of thinking? We'm too busy, — most of us, — an' that's the truth."

"Jimmery!" exclaimed Matthew. "I never did in all my born days hear tell of the like o' you! You won't work an' you won't pray — 'tis terrible. All the same, if you don't get the vicarage again, an' come as under-gardener to the squire, as he've offered you, I tell you frankly, friends though we be, that you'll have to work harder than you've worked for twenty years."

"I know it very well, Matt," said Mr. Hannaford. "Your way an' mine be different, root an' branch; an' I pray God as I may not have to come under you, for I'd hate it properly, an' that's the truth. An' I do work, an' I do pray likewise; an' I'd back my chance of going up aloft with my last shirt, if there was any to take the bet. You'm too self-righteous along of your high wages —"

"Joseph! 'tis time you put on your black," cried a voice from the cottage door.

Here grew a feeble honeysuckle that had been nailed up four years before, and still struggled gamely with a north aspect and neglect.

On the other side of the doorway was a thrush in a cage. It appeared too spiritless even to mount its wooden perch, but sat on the floor of its prison and listlessly pecked at nothing.

Mrs. Hannaford had a thin, flat figure, a hard mouth, keen eyes and a face like a fowl. Tremendous force of character marked her pale visage. The grey curls that hung there on each side of her narrow forehead looked like steel shavings.

"Dress," she said, "an' be quick about it. Ah, Mr. Smallridge — helping Joseph to waste his time."

"Not me, ma'am; that's about the only job he doesn't want helping with. I've just been telling your man that if Mr. Budd to the vicarage doan't need him, an' he takes squire's offer an' comes to me, theer must be more work an' less talk."

"The new parson will want him," said Mrs. Hannaford, decidedly. "Who should stick a spade in that earth after twenty-five years if not Joseph?"

"Very plants would cry out if anybody else was put awver them," said Mr. Hannaford, sentimentally.

"Cry out for joy, I reckon," murmured Matthew, but not loud enough for his friend's wife to overhear him. "Theer's wan thing you should know," he continued, changing the subject. "Parson Budd be a tremendous Church of Englander, so I heard squire say. He've got his knife into all chapel-people an' free-thinkers an' such like."

"'Tis a free country," answered Mrs. Hannaford, and her curls almost appeared to clatter as she shook her head. "He'd better mind his awn business, which be faith, hope an' charity, an' not poke his nose into other people's prayers!"

"As for religion," declared Joseph, "the little as I've got time for in that line be done along with my missis an' the Plymouth Brethren. But theer ban't no smallness in me. Room in the Lard's mansions for all of us; an' if the roads be narrer, theer's plenty of 'em, an' plenty of gates to the Golden Jerusalem."

Mrs. Hannaford frowned.

"You'm too free with your views, Joseph Hannaford," she said. "You'd best call to mind what pastor said to chapel last Sunday, 'bout the camel an' the needle's eye. Many be called an' few chosen, so theer's an end of it. The Brethren's way be the right way an' the strait way; an' ban't your business to be breaking gates into heaven for them as do wrong, an' think wrong, an' haven't a spark of charity, an' be busy about the Dowl's work in every other cottage in this village. I know what church folks be — nobody better."

Mr. Smallridge, himself of the established religion, retreated before this outburst.

"Hell of a female that," he said to himself. "How the man can keep heart after all these years

be a mystery. Yet she sits light upon him, seemingly."

Then Joseph, with some groans and grumbles, went to decorate himself, that the new incumbent might smile upon him and reappoint him to the care of the vicarage garden. He shaved very carefully, washed, showed Mrs. Hannaford his finger-nails, — a matter he usually shirked, — donned his best attire, and finally started beside his wife to appear before Mr. Budd.

"'Tis a grievous choice," he said; "an' if the man doan't take me on, I'll have to go to the Hall under Smallridge — a very ill-convenient thing to think upon."

"'Tis a matter of form, but better the Hall than any paltering with what's right; an' better be under Smallridge than against your conscience."

"My conscience is very well, an' always have been since I was a bwoy."

"You'm a deal tu easy, however," she answered sternly — "a deal tu easy, an' you'll very likely find that out when 'tis tu late. Your conscience be like proud-flesh, I reckon: don't hurt 'e 'cause 'tis past feeling. I wish it pricked you so often as your rheumatics do. 'Twould be a sign of grace."

"You'm like poor Parson Truman's li'l maiden wi' her flowers, you be," he retorted. "Her was always dragging up the things to see how they pros-

pered, an' you'm always dragging up your conscience by the roots, same way, to see how 'tis faring. I let mine bide."

"You can't," snapped back Mrs. Hannaford. "Conscience ban't built to bide — no more'n a growing pear upon a tree. It goes from gude to better, or else from bad to worse. You ban't so righteous-minded as I could wish 'e, Joseph; but I've done a deal for you since we've been man an' wife; an' if you'm spared ten year more, I lay I'll have your conscience to work so hard as a man saving his own hay."

"Pity you can't live an' let live, my dear," answered the gardener. "Even the weeds was made by God for His own ends, as I always told Truman. You'm a very religious woman; an' nobody knaws it better'n you; all the same, if folks' consciences ax for such a power of watching, 'tis enough for every human to look after theer own, surely."

"Why for don't you do it, then?"

"Here's the vicarage," he answered. "Us better not go in warm — might be against us. I'll dust my boots, an' you'd best to cool your face, for 'tis glistening like the moon in the sky."

Presently they stood before a busy newcomer. He proved a young, plump, and pleasant man — a man fond of fishing and fox-hunting, a man of rotund voice and rotund figure. Joseph's heart

grew hopeful. Here was no dragon of horticulture, but one, like himself, who would live and let live, and doubtless leave the garden in the hands of its professional attendant.

"Your servant, sir," he said. "I hope your honour be very well an' likes the church an' the hunt — also the garden."

"Mr. Joseph Hannaford, I suppose, and this is Mrs. Hannaford — good parishioners both, of course? Sit down, Mrs. Hannaford, please."

"'Tis in a nutshell, sir, an' we won't keep a busy gentleman from his business," said the old woman, very politely. "Joseph here have been gardener at the vicarage, man an' bwoy, for twenty-five years — ever since theer was a garden at all. He helped to cut out the peat an' make the place, as was just a new-take from Dartymoor, though now 'tis so good stuff as ever growed a cabbage."

"Ess fay; all rotted manure an' butivul loam, so sweet as sugar, an' drains like a sieve," declared Joseph.

"I want a gardener, of course, and cannot do better than Mr. Hannaford, though I'm not sure if it isn't too much for one elderly man."

"It is!" almost shouted Joseph. "Never a Bible prophet said a truer word! Too much by half. Not that I'd demean myself to ax for another man, but a bwoy I should have, an' I hope your

honour will give me a bwoy, if 'tis only to fetch an' carry."

"What wages did you get from Mr. Truman?"

"Pound a week; an' another shilling would be a godsend, if I may say it without offence."

"An' up to squire's they only offered him seventeen an' sixpence, with all his ripe experience," said Mrs. Hannaford. "'Twould be a fine lesson in Christianity to squire, I'm sure, if you seed your way to twenty-one shilling."

"Better than a waggon-load of sermons, if I may say so," continued Joseph.

"A sight better, seeing squire's not greatly 'dicted to church-gwaine, best of times," chimed in Mrs. Hannaford.

"You'd be under-gardener there, no doubt?"

"Ezacally so, dear sir. Under-gardener beneath Smallridge — a man three year younger than me. But ban't for me to tell my parts. All the same, I wouldn't work under Smallridge, not for money, if I could help it. Very rash views he've got 'bout broccoli, not to name roots an' sparrowgrass."

"Terrible wilful touching fruit, also, they tells me," added Mrs. Hannaford.

"Well, you must come, I suppose. I could hardly turn you out of your old garden; nor is there any need to do so."

"An' thank you with all my heart, your hon-

our; an' you'll never regret it so long as I be spared."

"The extra shilling you shall have. As to a boy, I want a stable-boy, and he'll be able to lend you a hand in the summer."

Mr. Hannaford nodded, touched his forehead, and mentally arranged a full programme for the boy.

"Enough said, then. On Monday I shall expect you, and will walk round with you myself and say what I've got to say. Good-bye for the present."

Mr. Budd rose, and the old pair, with many expressions of satisfaction, were about to depart when their vicar spoke again.

"One more matter I may mention, though doubtless there is no necessity to do so with two such sensible people. There are more sects and conventicles here than I like to find in such a very small parish. Of course you come to church every Sunday, Mr. Hannaford?"

"As to that, your honour—" began Joseph; then his wife silenced him.

"We'm Plymouth Brethren from conscience," she said. "You ban't gwaine to object, surely—you as have come here to preach charity an' such like?"

Mr. Budd flushed.

"I've come to do my duty, ma'am, and don't

need to be told what that is by my parishioners, I hope. All servants of the vicarage will, as a matter of course, go to church twice every Sunday, and upon week-days also, if I express any wish to that effect."

"Let 'em, then," answered the old woman, fiercely. "You can bind 'em in chains of iron, if you will, an' they'm feeble-hearted enough to let 'e. But us won't. Us be what we be, an' Plymouth Brethren have got somethin' better to do than go hunting foxes, whether or no. I'm a growed woman, an' Joseph's my husband, an' he shan't be in bondage to no man. To squire's garden he shall go, an' save his sawl alive, so now then! Gude evening, sir."

"If I may have a tell —" began Joseph, in a tremor of emotion; but his wife cut him short.

"You may not," she cried sternly. "You come home. Least said soonest mended. Awnly I'm sorry to God as a Cæsar of all the Roosias have come to Postbridge instead of a Christian creature."

So saying, she clutched Joseph and led him away. But on their silent journey homeward Mr. Hannaford pondered this tremendous circumstance deeply. Then, at his cottage gate, he rallied and spoke his mind.

"We've done wrong," he said, "an' I be gwaine back again to confess to it afore I sleep this night."

"We've done right. You'll save your sawl an' take seventeen shilling an' sixpence. You'll be a martyr for conscience, an' I be proud of 'e."

"Martyr or no martyr, I knaw a silly auld woman, an' I ban't proud of 'e at all, nor of myself neither. Anything in reason I'd do for you, an' have done ever since I took you; but being put to work in cold blood under Smallridge is more'n I will do for you or for all the Plymouth Brothers that ever bleated hell-fire to a decent man. I won't go under Smallridge. He'd make me sweat enough to float a ship; an' at my time of life 'twould shorten my days."

"The Lord'll help 'e, Joseph."

"Lord helps those who help theerselves."

"You'm gwaine to the Hall, however, for I've said it."

"Not me — never."

"You be, Joseph Hannaford, as I'm a living woman."

"No. Not for nobody, Jane! I've never crossed you in my life; I've knuckled under like a worm for forty-three year, an' shall henceforward just the same; but wheer Smallridge be in question I'm iron. I go to church next Sunday."

"You never shall!"

"I always shall — an' glad to get back. 'Twas a very silly thing to leave it."

Mrs. Hannaford put her fowl-like nose within two inches of her husband's.

"I dare you to do it."

"Ban't no use flustering yourself, my old dear. Every human man's got one kick in him. An' kick I'm gwaine to this instant moment."

He turned and left her with great agility, while she — the foundations of her married life suddenly shaken by this earthquake — stood and stared and gasped up at heaven.

Joseph quickly vanished into the dusk, and soon stood once more before the new vicar. Mr. Budd thereupon raised his eyes from his desk and asked a question without words.

"Well, your honour, 'tis like this here: I'll go back to church again very next Sunday as falls in."

"Ah! But I thought that Joseph would be in bondage to no man?"

"Nor no woman neither," said Mr. Hannaford.

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

"HE'M a monkey that hath seen the world, no doubt," said Merryweather Chugg, the water-bailiff.

"Yes — an' brought back some nuts wi' gold kernels, by all accounts," answered Noah Sage; "though he ban't going to crack none here, I reckon, for the chap's only come to have a look at the home of his youth; then he'm off again to foreign parts."

The two old men sat in the parlour of the "Bella-ford" Inn at Postbridge, and about them gathered other labouring folk. All were inhabitants of the Dartmoor district, and most had been born and bred in the valley of East Dart or upon adjacent farms. This village, of which the pride and glory is an old bridge that spans the river, shall be found upon the shaggy breast of the Moor, like an oasis in the desert; for here much land has been snatched from the hungry heath, groves of beech and sycamore lie in the bosom of these undulating wastes, and close at hand are certain snug tenement farms whereon men have dwelt and wrestled with the wild land from time immemorial.

To-day a native had returned to his home; and as a vacant room at the "Bella-ford" Inn well served

his purpose, Mr. Robert Bates secured it for a fortnight, that he might wander again about his boyhood's haunts and shine a little in the eyes of those who still remembered him. That night he had promised to relate his experiences in the public bar; he had also let it be known that upon this great occasion beer and spirits would flow free of all cost for old friends and new.

"He'll have to address a overflowed meeting, like a Member of Parliament," said Michael French, the Moor-man, "for be blessed if us can all get in your bar, Mrs. Capern."

"Lots of room yet," she said, "if you'd only turn some of they boys out-of-doors. They won't drink nought, so I'd rather have their room than their company."

"I should think you was uncommon excited to see this chap, ban't you?" asked Noah Sage of a very ancient patriarch in the corner. "It was up to Hartland Farm, when you was head man there, that Bob Bates comed as a 'pretence from Moreton Poorhouse, if I can remember."

"Ess fay, 'tis so," said the other. "You ax un if the thrashings I used to give un every other day for wasting his time weern't the makin' of un; an' if he ban't a liar, he'll say 'twas so. If he owes thanks to any man, 'tis to old Jacob Pearn — though I say it myself."

"That's the truth, an' I'll allow every word of it, Jacob; an' I'm terrible glad you ban't dead, for you were the first I meant to see come to-morrow."

Mr. Bates himself spoke. He was a small, wiry man of fifty or thereabout. His clothes were well cut, and he wore a gold watch-chain. His face and hands were tanned a deep brown; his hair was grizzled, and his beard was also growing grey at the sides. His eyes shone genially as he grasped a dozen hands in turn, and in turn answered twice a dozen salutations.

Robert Bates had run away from the heavy hand of Gaffer Pearn some five and thirty years before the present time, and he looked round him now and saw but one familiar face; for the old men had passed from their labours, the middle-aged had taken their places, his former mates were growing grey and he could not recognise them.

"I'll tell you the whole tale if you'm minded," he said. "'Tis thirty years long, but give two minutes to each of they years an' I'll finish in a hour. An' meantime, Mrs. Capern — as was Nancy Bassett, an' wouldn't walk out Sundays with me last time I seed 'e — be so good as to let every gen'leman present have what he wants to drink, for I be going to leave ten pounds in Postbridge, an' I'd so soon you had it as anybody."

Great applause greeted this liberal determination.

"You'm an open-handed chap, wherever you've comed from," said Merryweather Chugg, "an' us all drinks long life an' good health to you an' yours, if so be you'm a family man."

"I'll come to that," answered Mr. Bates. "Let me sit by the fire, will 'e? I do love the smell of the peat, an' where I come from, us don't trouble about fires, I assure 'e, for a body can catch heat from the sun all the year round."

"You was always finger-cold in winter," said Mr. Pearn. "I mind as a boy your colour never altered from blue in frosty weather, an' you had a chilblain wheresoever a chilblain could find room for itself."

"'Tis so; an' when I runned away to mend my fortune, 'twas the knowledge that a certain ship were sailing down to the line into hot weather as made me go for a sailor. To Plymouth docks I went when I ran off, an' there met a man at the Barbican as axed me to come for cabin-boy; an' when he said they was going where the cocoanuts comed from, I said I'd go.

"My dear life!" murmured Mrs. Capern, — "to think what little things do make or mar a fortune!"

"'Tis so; — a drop of rum cold, mother, then I'll start on my tale. An' I may as well say that every word be true, for Providence have so dealt by me that to tell a falsehood is the last thing ever I would do."

"Not but what you used to lie something terrible when you was young, Bob," said Mr. Pearn, from the corner.

"I know it, Jacob," answered the traveller; "an' hard though you hit, you never hit hard enough to cure me of lying. 'Tis a damned vice, an' I never yet told a fib as paid for telling. But 'twasn't you cured me; 'twas a man by the name of Mistle, the bo'sun of the ship I sailed in. I told un a stramming gert lie, an' he found it out, an' — well, if you want to know what a proper dressing-down be, you ax a seafaring man to lay it on. In them days they didn't reckon they'd begun till they'd drawed blood out of 'e; an' so often as not they'd give 'e a bucket of salt water down your back arter, just so as you shouldn't forget where they'd been busy. One such hiding I got from Mistle, an' never wanted another. I'd so soon have told that man a second lie as I'd told God one to His shining face. An' long after, to show I don't bear no malice, when I fell on my feet, I went down to the port when my old ship comed in again two years later, an' in my pocket was five golden pounds for Mistle. Only he'd gone an' died o' yellow jack in the meantime down to the Plate, so he never got it. An' you boys there, remember what I say, an' never tell no lies if you want to get on an' pocket good wages come presently. 'Tis more than thirty years ago, an' the

man that did it dust; yet I wriggles my shoulders an' feels the flesh crawl on my spine to this day when I thinks of it.

"But I'm gwaine too fast, for I haven't sailed from Plymouth yet. Us went off in due course, an' I seed the wonders of the deep, an' I can't say I took to 'em; but there — I'd gone for a sailor, an' a sailor I thought 'twould have to be. Us got to a place by name of Barbados in the West Indies presently — Bim for short. A flat pancake of an island, with not much to tell about 'cept that there's only a bit of brown paper between it an' a billet I hope none of us won't never go to. Hot as — as need be, no doubt; but there was better to come, for presently we ups anchor an' away to St. Vincent — a place as might make you think heaven couldn't be better; an' then down to Grenada, another island so lovely as a fairy story; an' then Trinidad — where the Angostura bitters comes from, Mrs. Capern — an' then a bit of a place by name of Tobago, as you could put down on Darty-moor a'most an' leave some to double up all round. Yet, 'pon that island, neighbours, I've lived my life, an' done my duty, I hope, an' got well thought upon by black, white an' brindled; for in them islands I should tell you the people be most every shade you could name but green. Butter-coloured, treacle-coloured, putty-coloured, saffron-coloured,

peat-coloured, an' every colour; an' sometimes, though a chap may have the face of a nigger — lips an' nose an' wool an' all — yet he'll be so white as a dog's tooth; an' you know there's blood from Europe hid in him somewheres. They'm a mongrel people; yet they've got souls — just as much as they Irish-Americans; an' God He knows if *they've* got souls, there's hope for everything — down to a scorpion. My own wife, as I've left out in Tobago with my family — well, I wouldn't go for to call her black; an' for that matter I knocked a white man off the wharf to Scarborough in Tobago, who did say so; but you folks to home — I dare swear you'd think her was a thought nigger-like, owing to a touch of the tar-brush, as we call it, long ways back in her family history. But as good a woman — wife an' mother — as ever feared God an' washed linen. A laundress, neighbours — lower than me by her birth, so my master said; then I laughed in his face, an' told un I was a workhouse boy as couldn't name no father but God A'mighty. A nice little bungy, round-about woman, wi' butivul black eyes, an' so straight in her vartue as a princess. Never a man had no better wife, an' her'd have come to see old Dartymoor along with me but for my family, as be large an' all sizes.

“Well, to Tobago it was that, lending a hand to help lade a Royal Mail Steam Packet as comed in

— just to make a shilling or two while we was idle, I got struck down. Loading wi' cocoanuts an' turtle her was; an' 'twould make you die o' laughin', souls, to have seen them reptiles hoisted aboard by their flippers. No laughing matter for them though, poor twoads, because, once they'm caught by moonlight 'pon the sandy beaches there, 'tis a very poor come-along-of-it for 'em. Not a bit more food do they have, but just be shipped off home in turtle-troughs an' make the best weather they can. Us had a stormy journey back last fortnight, an' I knowed by the turtle-soup o' nights that the creatures were dying rapid an' somebody had made a bad bargain. But if you gets the varmint home alive, they be worth a Jew's eye.

“Suddenly, helping in a shore barge, I went down as if somebody had fetched me a clout 'pon top the head; an', when I came to, there was doctor from shore an' the dowl to pay. 'Twas days afore I could get about, an' my ship couldn't wait, an' no work for me nowhere 'cept odd jobs. Then they told me I was a D.B.S., which means a Distressed British Seaman, an' I found as I'd have to wait for next steamer that comed to ship me off. But I weren't very down-daunted 'bout it, for, since I'd seen the size of the earth, I'd growed bigger in the mind a bit, an' I ate my food an' smoked my pipe an' thanked God that I was alive to try again.

"Then, trapesing about one afternoon, footsore like and tired of trying to get something to do on the sugar estates, I climbed over a wall into a bit of shade, an' sat me down under some cocoa trees to rest. I confess I did get over a wall, which is a thing you can't often do without making trouble except on old Dartymoor. An' there I was with the mountains around — all covered to their topmost spurs wi' wonnerful forest, and the Caribbean Sea stretched blue as blue underneath. Such a jungle of trees an' palms laced together with flowering vines as you've never dreamed of. Trumpet flowers, an' fire-red flamboyants, an' huge cactuses, an' here an' there a lightning-blasted, gert tree towering stark white above all the living green. An' king-birds an' humming-birds twinkling about in the air like women's rings an' brooches, an' lizards so big as squirrels a-scampering upon the ground, an' tree-frogs in the trees, an' fireflies spangling the velvet-black nights. An' no dimpsy light, neither at dawn nor even, for the moment sun be down 'tis night, an' moment he be up again 'tis morning. You can see un climb straight out o' the sea as if he was rolling up a ladder.

"I sat there in the shade, an' at my very hand what should I find but a ripe pomegranate? 'Tis a fruit as you folks haven't met with outside the Bible, I reckon, yet a real thing, an' very nice to

them as like it. Packed tight wi' seeds, the colour of the heather, wi' a bitter-sweet taste to it as be very refreshing to the throat. Such a fruit I picked without 'by your leave,' an' chewed at un, an' looked at the butivul blue sea down-under, an' talked to myself out loud, as my manner always was.

"'Well, Bob Bates,' I sez, 'you be most tired o' caddling about doing nought, ban't you? Still, you'm a lucky chap, whether or no; for a live D.B.S. be a sight better'n a dead cabin-boy. 'Twill larn 'e to treat the sun less civil. Don't do for to cap to him in these parts. But you keep up your heart an' trust in the Lord, as Mistley told 'e. He'll look to 'e for sartain in His own time.'

"Then I heard a curious ristling alongside in the bush, an' catched sight of a pair o' cat-like eyes on me. 'Course I knowed there wasn't no savage beasts there, but I didn't know as there mightn't be savage men, an' I was going to get back over thicky wall an' run for it. But too late. They was human eyes, wi' a human nose atop an' a human moustache under, but a very comical fashion of face an' a queerer than ever I'd seen afore or have since.

"'Tis hard for me to call home exactly what Matthew Damian looked like then, for 'tis above thirty year ago, an' that man filled my eye every day, winter an' summer, for twenty years. Yet, though he looks different now, with all I know behind my

mind's eye as I see him, then he 'peared mighty strange, wild an' shaggy. A face like a round shot he had, but a terrible deep jaw under the ear. A little chin, round eyes — grey-green — an' ears standing sharp off a close-cropped head, wi' hair pepper-an'-salt colour. A huge, tall man, an' his beard was cut to his chin, an' his moustache stuck out like a bush five inches to port an' starboard. Well, I was mortal feared, for I'd never seen nothing like un outside a nightmare; yet his voice was so thin as a boy's, an' piped like a reed in his thick throat. He had the nigger whine, too — as I dare say you may mark on my tongue now, after my ears have soaked in it so long.

"He stared an' I stared. Then he spoke. 'You come along with me,' he said in a Frenchy sort of English.

"'Why for?' I said; then I thought I seed his eyes 'pon the pomegranate. 'Very sorry, sir, if this here be yours,' I said; 'but I'm baggered if a chap can tell what be wild an' what ban't on this here ridicklous island. 'Tis like a gentleman's hothouse broke loose,' I said to un.

"'No matter about that,' he said.

"'I can give 'e my knife,' I told un, 'if you must have payment; but that be all I've got in the world 'cept the things I stand up in, an' I'd a deal rather keep it.'

“‘I do not want your knife,’ he answers. ‘I want you.’

“‘Well, I’m going cheap, I do assure ‘e,’ I said, thinking I’d try how a light heart would serve me. But I weren’t comfortable by a long way, ‘cause there’s a lot of madness in them islands, an’ I thought as this chap might be three-halfpence short of a shilling, as we say. However, he was too busy thinking to laugh at my poor fun, an’ for that matter, as I found after, he never laughed easy, — nor talked easy for that matter. Now he fell silent, an’ I walked by him. Then, after a stretch through a reg’lar Garden of Eden, wi’out our first parents, us comed upon a lovely house, whitewashed home to the roof — like snow in all that butivul green. ‘Pon sight of it the man spoke again.

“‘I want you to talk to my mother,’ he said suddenly. ‘You’ll just talk and talk in an easy way, as you was talking to yourself when I found you.’

“‘I be only a sailor-man, wi’ nought to say to a lady,’ I told him.

“‘No matter for that,’ he said. ‘Just talk straight on. It do not signify a bit what you say, so you speak natural. In fact, talk to my mother as if madame was your own mother.’

“So then, of course, I reckoned the cat-faced chap was out of his mind — as who wouldn’t have?

“To a great verandah we comed, all crawled over

with the butivulest white flowers the sun draws the scent from; an' there, in a cane chair, sat an ancient lady — lady, I say, though you might have reckoned she was an old brown lizard by the look of her. Old ban't the word for her. Time's self would have looked a boy alongside her, if the picture-books be true. A great sunbonnet was over her head, an' a frill under, an' just a scanty thread or two of white hair peeping from that. A face all deep lines where the years had run over it; bright eyes peeping from behind great gold spectacles, an' hands — my word! like joints of an old apple tree. Her was that homely too! A dandy-go-risset gown her wore, an' a bit of knitting was in her hands, an' a good book, wi' very large print, 'pon a table beside her, an' a li'l nigger gal waved a fan to keep the flies away.

"I took my hat off an' made a leg; then her son spoke: 'Sit down there beside her and talk loud, and pretend with yourself that Madame Damian is your grandmother. Don't try to use fine words; and remember this: if you do rightly as I bid you, you shall never repent this day as long as you live.'

"I was all in a maze, I do assure 'e; but I just reckoned obedience was best, an' went at her with one eye on my gentleman, for fear as he should change his mind.

"'Well, my old dear,' I said, 'I be very pleased to meet 'e, an' I do like to have a tell with 'e very

much, if you'll pardon a rough sailor-man. An' I hopes you'll put in a word with this here big gen'leman for me, 'cause I've eat one of his pomegranates unbeknownst-like, though I'm shot if I'd have touched un come I'd known 'twasn't wild. An' to tell 'e gospel, I be in a jakes of a mess as 'tis — far from my home an' not a friend in the world that I know of.'

"Dallybuttons! To see that ancient woman! When I began to talk, her dropped her knitting, as if there was a spider in it, an' sat up an' stared out of her bead-black eyes. Though 'twas a fiery day, I went so cold as a frog all down my spine to see her glaze so keen.

"'Go on,' she said in a funny old voice, 'go on, young man, will 'e? Tell about where you comed from, please.'

"There! it did sound mighty familiar to hear her, an' no mistake!

"'My heart! You'm West Country too!' I cried out.

"Her nodded, but her couldn't speak another word.

"'Go on, go on talking to her,' the man said.

"So I sailed on.

"'You must know I runned off to sea, ma'am, from a farm down Dartmoor way. 'Tis a terrible coorious sort of a place, an' calls for hard work if

you wants to thrive there. Roots will do if you'm generous with stable stuff an' lime, but corn be cruel shy, except oats. I was a lazy boy, I'm afraid, an' got weary of being hit about like a foot-ball, though I deserved it; an' I thought to mend my life by running away. The things I've seed! Lor'-a-mercy! 'tis a wonnerful world, sure enough, ma'am.'

"So it be,' she said, very soft, 'an' a wonnerful God made it, my dear. Go on, go on about the Dartymoors, will 'e?'

"Well,' I said, 'tis a gert, lonesome land, all broke up wi' rocky tors, as we call 'em, an' clitters o' granite where the foxes breed, an' gashly bogs, in which you'm like to be stogged if you don't know no better. An' the cots be scattered over the face of it, an' the little farms do lie here an' there in the lew corners, wi' their new-take fields around about. There's a smell o' peat in the air most times, an' it do rise up very blue into the morning light. An' the great marshes glimmer, an' the plovers call in spring; an' the ponies, wi' their little ragged foals, go galloping unshod over the Moor. Then the rivers an' rills twinkle every way, like silver an' gold threads stretching miles an' miles; an' come summer the heather blows an' the great hills shine out rosylike an' butivul; an' — oh, my old dear — oh, ma'am —' I says, breaking off, 'doan't 'e — doan't 'e sob

so — doan't 'e take on like that, for I wouldn't bring a wisht thought to 'e for money.'

"This I said 'cause the old ancient's lips shook, an' her bright eyes fell a-blinking, an' great tears rolled down. Then she put her hands over her face an' bowed over 'em.

"My God!" said the chap, half to hisself, 'this is the first time my mother have wept to my sight; an' I am sixty years old!'

"But of course a Devonshire woman wouldn't cry afore a Frenchman, even if he was her son.

"Come presently she cheered up. 'Do 'e know a place by the name of Postbridge, my boy?' she says.

"I did ought to, ma'am,' I sez; 'twas from Hartland Farm I runned.'

"She sighed a gert sigh. 'Hartland!' she says, as if the word was a whole hymn tune to her.

"There's a church, an' a public, there now,' I said.

"An' the gert men of renown? Parson Mason, an' Mr. Slack, an' Judge Buller, an' Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt?' she axed me.

"Never heard tell of none of them,' I said.

"Course not,' old lady answers. 'Why — why, I forgot I be ninety-four. They heroes was all dead afore your faither an' mother were born.'

"As to them,' I tells her — 'as to my faither an'

mother, ma'am, there's a manner of grave doubt, for I'm a workhouse boy, wi'out any havage that be known.'

"But her had fallen to dreaming.

"'Tell about the in-country,' she said all of a sudden. 'My mother comed from down Totnes way.'

"So I tells about the South Hams, an' the farms, an' the butivul apple-blooth, as creams out over the orchards in spring, an' all the rest of it.

"There, I talked myself dry an' no mistake; an' she nodded an' nodded an' laughed once; an' it set her off coughing, an' 'frighted her son terrible.

"Then, after I'd been chittering for a month of Sundays, as it seemed to me, the day ended and it comed on dark, an' she got up to go.

"'Keep un here,' she says to the man. 'For God's love doan't 'e let un go. Pay un anything he axes for to stop.'

"She went off very slow, wi' a nigger to support her at each elbow, an' a fine young brown woman to look after her. An' I was took in the kitchen, an' had such a bellyful of meat an' drink as minded me of Christmas up to Hartland Farm in the old days.

"Then the chap — he lets me into the riddle of it all. You see his mother was Farmer Blake's darter — the first as ever saved land in these parts, an' rented from the Duchy more'n a hundred years

agone now. An' when Princetown was made for a prison to hold the French us caught in the wars, there comed a Monseer Damian among the prisoners. Him an' many other gents the authorities let out on parole, as they say; an' he made friends with Farmer Blake, an' falled in love with Margery Blake. An' when war was done, if he didn't marry her all correct an' snatch her away to foreign parts! Martinique was left to the French, an' he took her to that island first, then to Trinidad, which be ours, then to Tobago, which be also ours. There the man prospered, an' growed sugar, an' did very flourishing, an' comed to be first an' richest party in the island. But smallpox took him in middle life, an' it took all his children but his eldest son, Matthew Damian. He bided with his mother, an' married a French woman from Guadeloupe.

"An' 'twas old lady's hope an' prayer for seventy year to hear good Devon spoke again some day. Her only got to hunger terrible for the old country when her childer an' her husband died, by which time she was too old to travel home again. An' the Postbridge Blakes had all gone dead ages afore; an' in truth there couldn't have been a soul on Dartmoor as remembered her. Of course her son knowed the sound of the speech, from hearing his mother, as never lost it; an' when he caught me telling to myself, his first thought was for her.

"'Twas meat an' drink to her, sure enough; an' meat an' drink to me too, for that matter, because I never left the Man-o'-War Bay Sugar Estate no more. Very little work I done at first, for old Mrs. Damian would have me keep on 'bout home every afternoon in the verandah; but six months after I comed there she died, happy as a bird; an' if I wasn't down for fifty pound in her will!

"Richest people in Tobago, they was; an' then I settled to work for Matthew Damian, an' when he died, seventeen year after, the head man was pensioned off, an' I got the billet under Matthew Damian's son, who be my master now. An' there I'll work to the end, an' my childern after me, please the Lord."

"'Tis a very fine tale, Mr. Bates, if I may speak for the company," said Merryweather Chugg; "an' it do show what a blessing it be to come out of Devonshire. If you'd been a foreigner, now, none of these good things would have happened to 'e."

"I mind my faither telling about Farmer Blake an' how he helped to carry his coffin to Widecombe soon after I was born," said Gaffer Pearn.

"For my part," declared the landlady, "my mind be all 'pon that poor old blid, as went away from these parts in her maiden days. To think, after seventy years of waiting, that she should hear a

Devonshire tongue again! I lay it helped her to pass in peace."

"It did so," declared the returned native. "She went out of life easy as a babby; for her appeared to see all her own folks very clear just afore she died, an' she was steadfast sure as there'd be a West-Country welcome waitin' up-along. Fill your glasses, my dears; an' give they boys some ginger-beer, ma'am, will 'e?"

THE TWO WIDOWS

THE TWO WIDOWS

CHAPTER I

UPON the great main road that crosses Dartmoor from Moretonhampstead to Plymouth, and distant but half a mile from the little hamlet of Postbridge, near the eastern arm of Dart, there stand two cottages. Here slopes the broad bosom of Merripit Hill upon the heart of the wilderness, and the cots, that appear on each side of the way, are built exactly alike — of yellow bricks and blue slates. They have doors of the same green shade and window blinds of white chintz; their woodwork is painted brown, and their chimney-pots are red. In every respect these habitations seem outwardly identical, save that one faces north, while the other, over against it, looks southerly. Their gardens are of equal proportion, and contain the same class of cabbage, similar rows of tall scarlet-runner beans sprout from each little plot in summer, and patches of red lettuce, dusted over with soot to keep away the slugs, appear in both during springtime. Once two men dwelt in these abodes, and they were wiser

than their wives and maintained an amiable acquaintance, but avoided hot friendship.

When Abel Haycraft and his newly married mate arrived at the northern-facing cottage, Henry Mogridge, the water-bailiff, who dwelt in the cottage that looked south, paid him a visit and put the position briefly and forcibly:—

“’Tis like this, Mr. Haycraft,” he said. “I be very glad to have you for a neighbour, an’ I hope you’ll like Dartymoor, an’ prosper up here, an’ make good money at Vitifer Mine, where I’m told you be going to work; but this I’ll say, don’t let’s be too friendly—nor our women-folk neither. Out of friendship I say it.”

“What a word!” said Mr. Haycraft, who was only twenty-one and of a sanguine nature. “Why, I wants to be friends with everybody, if so be as they’ll let me. An’ my missis too.”

“That’s a very silly idea; but you’m young yet and will larn better come by an’ by. I mean this: you an’ me live a gert deal too close together to get too thick. We’m only human beings, an’ so sure as we get too trustful an’ too fond of listening to each other’s business, so sure us will end by having a mortal row. ’Tis a thing so common as berries in a hedge. I ban’t saying a word against my old woman, mind you. She’s so truthful as light, an’ a Christian to the marrow in her bones. Nor yet be I hint-

ing anything disrespectful of Mrs. Haycraft. Far from it. But human creatures is mostly jerry-built in parts, an' the best have their weak spots. There's nought more dangerous on earth than a gert friendship struck up between folks who live close together 'pon opposite sides of the road. I've seed the whole story more than once, an' I know what I say be true."

Abel Haycraft considered this statement for a moment. Then he spoke: —

"I suppose you'm right. An' if by bad chance they was to fall out — I mean the women — us would have to take sides as a matter of duty. A husband — well, there 'tis."

"So us would; but God forbid as our wives should have any quarrel, or you an' me either; so we'll just bide friendly with your leave; but not too friendly."

"'Tis a very good plan, I'm sure," answered the younger; and that evening he told his wife about it after they had gone to bed.

Mrs. Haycraft felt great interest and enlarged Abel's vision.

"Do 'e know what that means? It means as his good lady can't be trusted, an' the old man well knows it. I lay she'm the sort as makes mischief. Well, don't you fear. I'll take care to keep her at arm's length. I wasn't born yesterday."

"She'm a kind enough creature so far, I'm sure,"

answered Abel. "A motherly fashion of woman, an' not so old as her husband by twenty years, I should judge."

"'Twas his way of giving us a warning, nevertheless," declared Honor Haycraft. "Or," she added, "seeing as I was a red-haired woman, and thinking maybe that I had a short temper, she may have reckoned that —"

"Not at all, not at all," interrupted the husband, hastily. "Do 'e think I'd have stood any such idea? God's my judge, I'd have hit the man in the mouth if he'd said a word against you or your butivul colour."

"If I thought she'd taken a dislike to me, because I was red, I'd never look at the woman," said Honor. "For that matter, I'm comelier far than her, though I say so."

"An' comelier than any other woman at Post-bridge, or on all Dartymoor either," declared Abel, devoutly.

"I'll be civil to her, then, but no more. An' I wish her hadn't brought over that gert dish of Irish stew the day us comed in an' we were sinking for a morsel to eat; for us ate it, an' lick^d the bones, an' now she've got a hold on us."

"Not at all," said the larger-minded man. "'Tis a poor spirit as can't stomach a kindness without worriting to pay it back. Us'll have a chance of

doing her a good turn for sartain, living at her door same as we do. Just let things go their own way, an' they'll go right. We'm all Christian creatures, thank God, an' there's no reason because we live in a outlandish sort of place like this here that we should forget it."

"All the same," declared his plump, red girl, pouting, "I could wish as Mr. Mogridge hadn't spoke them words. He've hurt my pride. I wasn't going to jump down their throats. I'm not that sort."

"'Twas a bit chilly like, perhaps; but he'm older than us, an' wiser, an' he meant well."

"He'm not wiser than you be, anyway. I believe, if us knowed, you'd find you made better money than what he do."

"Us'll leave it at that, then; an' now us'll go to sleep, if you please."

CHAPTER II

WITHIN a month Honor Haycraft and Avis Mogridge were the closest of friends, for, despite the water-bailiff's caution and the younger man's attempt to profit by it, their wives took the matter into their own hands. Both husbands were away all day at work; their cottages stood half a mile distant from any others, and the two lonely women soon struck up a close and intimate relation. Mrs. Mogridge was honourable, truthful, warm-hearted and affectionate; she had two young children, both girls; she loved her elderly husband dearly; she knew the life-history of every man and woman in Postbridge; and she related the affairs of the village with full detail for the benefit of Honor, who was an Exeter girl, and did not know the people of the Moor.

"I can talk straight to 'e," said Mrs. Mogridge, "for you come without one particle of feeling against anybody or for anybody. So I'll tell you what they all be like down-along, an' who you can trust an' who you can't trust, so far as I know 'em. You'll go your own way, but 'tis never any harm to hear another opinion."

Thus Mrs. Haycraft, instead of forming indepen-

dent conclusions from experience, took her view of the new neighbours and environment from another woman; and this was a happier circumstance than might be guessed, because Avisa Mogridge possessed plenty of good sense and a kindly heart, whereas, though the red girl's heart was warm enough, her head was rather weak, and of sense, or patience, or knowledge of human nature she had none to name. She was a superstitious woman, full of old saws and sayings. If she met a single magpie, she went in fear for a week. Her husband tried to laugh her out of such folly, but he never succeeded.

And so the friendship ripened and the men looked on. In secret Henry Mogridge prophesied a catastrophe, as sure as women were women all the world over; while Abel Haycraft listened and nodded, but hoped the water-bailiff might be mistaken.

Avisa and Honor worked side by side at the same wash-tub when their husbands were away, compared notes, listened to each other's wisdom and opinions. Honor petted her friend's little girls, and made sugar-plums and cakes for them; Avisa took the deepest interest in Honor's approaching motherhood.

A boy was born to the young wife — a flaxen, Saxon atom, with a first crop of hair the colour of straw, blue eyes, a flat nose like his father's, red cheeks, and very fat limbs.

Then came winter, and Henry Mogridge, catching a chill in the night watches by the river, passed away, a victim to his duty beside Dart.

Honor comforted her friend as much as might be, and Postbridge showed sympathy also, until it was announced that Mrs. Mogridge had been left with £40 a year. Thereupon, feeling that commiseration would be wasted, the village turned to more interesting matters.

Time sped, and when her child was a year old, Honor Haycraft followed Avis into the state of widowhood. An accident at Vitifer Mine ended the burly Abel's life; and with him there also perished another man and a boy.

CHAPTER III

THE two widows, united in tribulation, became greater friends than before. Neither married again, and the one lived for her little maidens, the other for her son. Such close amity proved a strain at times, however, and as each knew all that there was to know about the other, each, conscious of the other's imperfections, secretly regretted them in the friendliest spirit. Then came a little difference of opinion over the children; and then, from a personal attitude of irritation not divulged to anybody, Avis, smarting somewhat at a pin-prick from Honor Haycraft touching her eldest little girl, spoke in overt fashion to a common friend at Postbridge.

"She's a very good woman," said Mrs. Mogridge, while she drank a dish of tea with Mrs. Bloom. "A pattern wife her was, an' steady as time since her man was called, an' a pattern mother, though her goose is a swan, as one might expect, an' she thinks her ugly, li'l fat boy is a cherub, poor dear. Well, 'tis natural so to do. I wouldn't blame her; we mothers be all alike there. But I could wish she had more brains, an' didn't believe such a lot of rummage an' nonsense. To credit all that dead an' gone stuff

about pixies, an' the heath-hounds, an' the use of herbs picked in moonlight, an' the planting of seeds 'pon a Good Friday — why, 'tis onbecoming in a growed-up woman as went to Sunday-school; an' I wish she'd drop it."

That was all that Avisá said to Mrs. Bloom, the washerwoman; but a fortnight afterward it happened that by evil chance Mrs. Bloom fell out bitterly with the water-bailiff's widow, and told Mrs. Mogridge that she was a cat, and that 'twas well known her husband never died of a chill at all, but from his wife's unkindness and cruelty. She said a great many other things of a nature not necessary to set down; and, as a result, Mrs. Mogridge felt it impossible longer to affect the society of Mrs. Bloom.

Then did Mrs. Bloom ask Honor Haycraft to a cup of tea; and Honor, smarting with indignation at the treatment her dearest friend had received from the washerwoman's venomous tongue, accepted the invitation. Her purpose was loyal to the other widow. She intended to glean further particulars concerning Mrs. Bloom's abominable opinions and assertions touching Avisá. Because a man in the village had told them that Mrs. Bloom's statements were in the nature of a libel, and might even put her into prison.

Hoping to catch Mrs. Bloom in some outrageous utterance, and so assist her friend to crush the washer-

woman, Honor Haycraft appeared in a cottage that always reeked of soap and steam.

Mrs. Bloom immediately came to personalities; and then Honor's freckles stood out brown upon her red skin; she grew hot from her heart outward; the tea lost its savour, and the toast its charm.

"Sorry am I to quarrel with any living thing — man, woman or mouse — but one has one's pride," said Mrs. Bloom. "Ess, one has one's pride; an' if there's a thing I do pride myself upon, after my gift of washing, 'tis my gift of silence. It don't come easy to any healthy-minded woman in a village this size to keep her mouth shut; an' I confess that it didn't come easy to me; but I larned how to do it, an' I've been a faithful friend to a gert many people, an' never quarrelled with a living soul, gentle or simple, till Avisa Mogridge broke with me."

"She's got a proper grudge against you," said Honor, cautiously. "An' I'm on her side, I warn you."

"No doubt: you've heard her tale. I'm not going to say anything about it to you, because you are her particular friend, an' blessed are the peacemakers. But this I'll say, though far be it from me to set friends against friends: I would advise you to take care. She's a fire as a very little spark will set on light, — a very critical woman, — always was so. It's a fault where there's no judgement. Her can't help it. Her criticises other folks' ways, an' their

habits, an' their ideas, an' even their children. Now, if there is a dangerous trick on God's earth, 'tis to criticise other folks' children."

"She's a right to her opinions, however."

"Most surely she have; an' she've a right to the air she breathes, an' the water she drinks. She've a right to her ideas; but she's no right to utter 'em where they might do harm. You an' me be the best friends possible, thank God, an' she's no right to say an unkind word of you to me, any more than I'd have a right to say an unkind word of her to you; because you an' she be the best friends possible likewise. An' not a word against her would ever pass my lips to you; because you'm a woman as feels very deeply, an' I should make mischief, which God forbid."

"Her never said a word against me, that I'll swear to," said Honor, hotly; "an' if an angel from heaven told me her did, I wouldn't believe it."

"An' quite right you'd be," said Mrs. Bloom. "You put it like a true friend. True friendship be a-thought blind always; an' 'tis well it is so, for where there's clear seeing between any two human beings, old or young, man or woman, perfect friendship can't be. That's why I've always kept my mouth shut so close all my life; and I ban't going to begin to open it now I'm turned forty-five — not even to you, my dear."

"Not a word would I believe — not a syllable," repeated Honor.

"An' not a word would you hear from me — good or bad. What she said was kindly meant — very kindly meant indeed. It only showed that no two humans look at life from the same point of view. We knowed that afore. For my own part I've always declared that 'twas weak of you to believe all they stories of ghosts an' goblins, an' dancing stones an' the like. As a deep-thinking an' true Christian I feel it. But the difference between me an' her is that I say it to your face; she blames you behind your back."

"Avisa Mogridge has laughed at me often enough about it. That's nothing," said Honor. "I know 'tis nonsense really, but I can't help believing the things."

"I'm very glad you've got the sense to see it so. *
'No,' I said, 'no, Mrs. Mogridge, whatever Honor Haycraft may be, she's not a fool. Her father told her about these solemn things in her youth, an' many an old ancient man hereabouts do still believe in 'em, though of course the Bible is short an' sharp with witches an' such like.'"

"She didn't say I was a fool?"

"Well, since you ax me, I must be honest, for my own soul's sake. Trouble I won't make, an' you'm far too sensible to think of it again. 'Fool' was not

the word she used, but she wished you had more brains. That may be the same thing, or it may not. I up rather sharp an' denied you had any lack of intellects; but she said she was in the right. 'Prove it,' I said. 'Prove it you can't, Avis Mogridge. She'm a sensible, clever, good girl,' I said, 'an' her head's screwed on the right way.'

"She bided silent a moment. Then she said, 'Honor reckons her goose is a swan, an' thinks that her ugly, li'l fat boy is a cherub.' I stared at her till my eyes bulged out; I couldn't believe my own ears. She meant it, of course; but no call for you to grow so red, my dear, she didn't mean it a bit unkindly. 'Twas just her honest opinion that your little angel be too fat an' too ugly for anything. 'If you think that,' I answered her, 'you'd better not mention it.'"

"She said my li'l boy was ugly?"

"She thinks so. She's positive of it. She's a very honest woman, mind you. With all her many faults, she's honest. She wouldn't have said it if she hadn't really believed it. She'm dead certain of it."

"My Billy ugly! Did 'e ever set eyes on a finer babby, tell me that?"

"Me? I never seed such a purty child in all my life. He'm a like a li'l blue-eyed Love off a valentine. But she —"

"A woman who could say my child was ugly could only say it for malice," declared the red-haired mother, with a rising breast.

"Don't think that. Her own maidens be very homely, you see. 'Tis a little natural jealousy, be-like."

"'Tis a lie, Jane Bloom, an' I'll never believe she said it — never."

"You'll be sorry for that word, Honor Haycraft. Ax her, then. Ax her if her didn't tell me your little boy was fat an' ugly. She's never been caught out in a lie yet, 'tis said. See what she'll answer you. An' when you've heard her speak, I shall expect you to say you'm sorry to me. I never yet willingly uttered an unkind word against any living soul, an' never will. If you want to live in a fool's paradise, that's your lookout. But it shall never be said I didn't do my duty to my neighbour according to the Prayer Book ordinance."

With this vague but masterly speech Mrs. Bloom rose from her tea and held the cottage door open. Her guest took the hint, and in ten minutes was at home again.

Then she crossed the road, and seeing Avis Mogridge in her garden with the little girls and the infant Billy, who had been left in trust with her, Honor spoke: —

"Just one word, an' only one, afore I go down to

the village an' give that old cat-a-mountain, Jane Bloom, the lie to her crooked face."

"Ah! What have she said, then?" asked the other. Mrs. Mogridge rose from pulling up weeds, and lifted her shoulders to ease her back.

"She've told me as you told her that my child was fat an' ugly. I answered in one word that she was a wicked liar. An' she answered back that I'd better ax you, for you'd never been known to tell a falsehood in all your born days. Did you say it or didn't you, Avisas? I only want your word. Then I'll go back-along and give her what for."

Mrs. Mogridge paused with a bit of groundsel in her hand. The children frolicked beside her, and she bade them be silent, sharply. Then she dropped the groundsel and turned and spoke.

"I told you that you was wrong to go an' speak to her. I warned you against it. Now, I suppose, the fat's in the fire. You'd made me cross a fortnight agone, when you said that my Minnie's second teeth would never come right. An' I got talking like a fool just afterward, an' I certainly said to Mrs. Bloom that your goose was a swan — same as it is with all of us mothers — an' I said that your little, dear boy was — was ugly. 'Twasn't a right or a kind thing to say, an' I'm very —"

"You said it! An' like enough you've said it a thousand times. You'm a wicked traitor; an' I'll

never speak to you again, so help me God; an' if your beastly childer cross my threshold any more, or so much as touch my garden palings, I'll throw boiling water over 'em, so now you know, you evil-minded, jealous devil!"

Mrs. Haycraft spoke no more, and waited for no answer. She snatched up her child, rushed into her own house, banged the door and was soon sobbing over her fat-nosed Billy.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Jane Bloom's husband took his lady out of Postbridge, so that she might live down a conubial scandal and pursue her cleansing occupation elsewhere, it was supposed that the deadly and famous quarrel between Avis and Honor would be healed. The gossips of Postbridge all prophesied a speedy return to friendship between the two widows, and not a few well-meaning women set to work to play peacemaker. But their efforts met no response. Both Avis and Honor made it clear that arbitration must be in vain, since this tragic matter went deeper than plummet of peacemaker could ever sound. Neither woman would make the first move; but Mrs. Mogridge was prepared to welcome any overture from the other. She accepted the inevitable with considerable philosophy; rightly appreciated the significance of the position; perceived how the idlest, least malignant word may sometimes fall like a scourge upon the back of the careless speaker. She held herself punished, and quite deservedly punished, for a very foolish error. She mourned the event, and with secret tears recalled the wisdom of her dead partner. Mrs. Hay-

craft, on the other hand, nursed her wrath and kept it warm. Her little boy justified the bygone criticism, and he grew less and less personable. But how could she know that? To her eyes he was beautiful above the children of men. Daily he grew more like his father; daily his little weak eyes reflected more of the blue of the sky.

Then he fell very sick and died.

A night of agony hid Honor, and in that darkness her tears descended like winter rain. Hopeless, helpless, red-eyed, she sat by the small body; and women came to comfort her, but she cursed both God and them, and bade them depart and leave her alone with grief greater than daughter of man had yet suffered.

The day before the funeral the mother took no food, and entered upon that nervous, neurotic period common to the time. She never sat down. She roamed for miles in the narrow space of the house and garden. She arranged and rearranged the flowers on the coffin; she magnified small griefs and temporary inconveniences. She quarrelled bitterly with the undertaker that the lining of the little box was cheaper than she had directed. She found a small flaw also upon the lid. This was concealed with putty, and Honor called down the wrath of the Everlasting upon the carpenter who had made it.

A master sorrow in the minor sort now fell

upon her. There is a belief on Dartmoor that if a little boy dies, he should be carried to his grave by little girls, and when a small maid passes it is thought good if boys are her bearers. Honor hugged this tradition as a precious and seemingly observance; but it chanced that of small girls in Postbridge there were then but four, and the task she desired to set them would need six pairs of hands. The misfortune swiftly mounted into a tragedy when viewed from her distracted standpoint. Her unrestrained grief grew voluble; she mourned her lot to any who would listen. From the first storm of weeping and the first desire for peace and loneliness she became talkative, and, in a condition of sustained incoherence, chattered, light-headed, from morning until night. She was rude to the clergyman when he came to see her. Her friends suggested that two more little girls should be obtained from Princetown, or some neighbouring hamlet; but the poor soul explained that this rite allowed of no such deviation. The children must be those who had known her dead baby, and actually played with him. Others would not answer the proper purpose.

Upon the night before the funeral the undertaker went home a shattered man, for the matter of this tiny corpse had troubled him, and such failure to satisfy the parent hurt his professional feelings.

"There wasn't half the difficulties when us laid

by His Honour, Lord Champernowne, Peer of the Realm and J.P., an' ten coaches, an' a letter of thanks after from the steward," he grumbled to his wife. But she comforted him.

"The woman's stark, staring mad, my dear. Don't think no more about her. If you'd lined the casket with shining gold, her'd have grumbled because there weren't no diamonds in it. An' all for two pound, ten. 'Twas like your big heart to use elm, when any other man would have made deal do very nice."

Meantime, at the hour of gloaming, as Dartmoor vanished fold upon fold into the purple of night, did Avisa Mogridge pluck heart, and cross the high road, and enter her neighbour's house. She did not knock, but lifted the latch boldly, walked in and stood before Honor, where the unhappy mother sat and worked upon a black bonnet by candle-light.

"You! You to come! You, as may be a witch an' overlooked my li'l darling, for all I know!" she cried, leaping to her feet.

"Yes, 'tis me, Mrs. Haycraft; but no witch. Only a woman as have seed sorrow too — though no sorrow like your sorrow just now. I've come to tell 'e I love 'e still, an' I can't bide away from 'e no more, an' I won't. You shan't drive me off."

Honor breathed hard.

"Everything do happen all to once," she said.

"Maybe I didn't ought to have intruded; but I'm older than you, an' I thought —"

"You be safe. I'm too weak to bear malice against you. My darling's screwed down now. If you'd seed him yesterday, you'd have called back your wicked word, Avisa Mogridge. He weren't ugly after he died — he — oh, God, an' not one sound of his little noise in the house. It's killing me."

"To be frank with you, Honor, you must marry again. You'm only twenty-three. Yes, I know you be. An' 'twas my little girls put them flowers 'pon your window-sill last June on your birthday morning. They done it afore daybreak. An' — an' — oh, woman, I be broken-hearted for 'e; God's my judge if I ban't."

Mrs. Haycraft was rocking herself backward and forward, and crying.

Suddenly she rose up.

"Come an' see the coffin," she said. "Several of the gentry have sent greenhouse flowers to me. There's a butivul smell to 'em."

"I will come; an' I want to say this. My girls — do 'e let 'em help with the thing you want. They'd make six with t'other children. Do 'e let 'em, Honor."

"'Tis too late; they can't get black now."

"You forget my old mother died last Christmas."

"Ah! so her did—that's lucky," said Mrs. Haycraft.

After the funeral the widows walked together. They left their friends at Postbridge, then returned home side by side.

As they ascended the hill, with Avis's two little girls marching together behind them, a robin suddenly sang out sharp and clear.

"Thank the Lord I've heard that," said Honor, very earnestly, alluding to an ancient fable.

Her reconciled friend nodded.

"I be very glad also," she said. "To hear red-breast singing after a child is buried do mean the little one's safe in Heaven; though, all the same, God only knows where the babbies should go to, if not to Him."

WITH BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE



WITH BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE

CHAPTER I

ON a frosty night, when George III was King, certain men, for the most part familiar customers, sat in the bar of the "Golden Anchor," Daleham; and amongst them appeared that welcome addition to the usual throng: a stranger. For his benefit old tales were told anew and ancient memories ransacked; because this West country fishing village enjoyed rich encrustation of legend and romance, and boasted a roll call of great names and great deeds. Here dwelt the spirits of bygone free-traders, visible by night in the theatre of their lawless enterprises; and here even more notable stories, touching more notable phantoms, might also be gleaned from ancient intelligencers at the time of evening drinking.

The newcomer listened grimly to matters now much exercising Daleham. He was a hard-faced man with a blue chin and black eyes, whose short, double-breasted jacket, wide breeches, glazed hat and pigtail marked a seafarer.

"As for ghostes," he said, "can't swear I've ever seed one, but no sailor-man, as have witnessed the Lord's wonders in the deep, would dare to doubt 'em."

"Just picture a whole throng, my dear!"

John Cramphorn spoke. He was an ancient fisher, and his face might have stood for the Apostle Peter's; but it quite gave the lie to his character, for this venerable man was hand in glove with the smugglers, had himself been a free-trader of renown, and now very gladly placed his wit and experience at the command of the younger generation. No word was ever whispered against him openly, and yet the rumour ran that Johnny had his share of every cargo successfully run upon these coasts, and that he was the guiding spirit ashore, while "Merry Jonathan," or Jonathan Godbeer of Daleham, captained on the water that obscure body known as the Daleham free-traders.

With such a sailor as Jonathan afloat and such a wise-head as Mr. Cramphorn at home, the local smugglers earned a measure of fame that reached even to the Revenue. Indeed, at the moment of this story's opening, the little fishing village, with uneasy pride, was aware that a Preventive Officer had been appointed for its especial chastisement and control; but none feared the issue. Every woman and child at Daleham knew that it would

task men of uncommon metal with hard heads and thick skulls to lay their local champions by the heels.

“Ess,” said the white-bearded Cramphorn, “ghostes of men an’ ghostes of hosses tu. Ban’t many parishes as can shaw ’e such a brave turnout of holy phantoms, I lay. You might have seed that ruin in the fir trees ’pon top of the cliff as you comed down the hill p’raps? Wheer the fishermen’s gardens be. Well, ’twas a famous mansion in the old days, though now sinked to a mere landmark for mackerel boats. But the Stapledons lived theer in times agone, an’ lorded it awver all the land so far as Dartymouth, ’tis thought. Of course they died like theer neighbours, an’ many a brave funeral passed out-along wheer I grow my bit of kale to-day. Yet no account taken till theer comed the terrible business of Lady Emma Stapledon — poor soul. Her was ordered by her cold-hearted faither to marry a Lunnon man for his money — a gay young youth of gert renown, an’ as big a rip as ever you see, an’ a very evil character, but thousands of pounds in the bank to soften people’s minds. Her wouldn’t take him, however, an’ peaked an’ pined, till at last — two nights afore the marriage-day — her went out alone along that dangerous edge of cliff what be named the Devil’s Tight-rope. In charity us’ll say the poor maiden’s foot slipped, though if it did,

why for should her funeral walk ever since when January comes round? Anyway it shows her had Christian burial no doubt, an' the funeral can be seen evermore — hosses an' men, hearse an' coffin. Every moony night in January it may be marked stealin' like a fog awver the tilth by the old road from the ruined gates; an' to see it only axes a pinch of faith in the beholder. I've watched it scores o' dozens o' times — all so black as sin an' silent as the grave. My sweat falled like rain fust time I seed it, but I minded how the Lord looks arter His awn. Of course an honest, church-going man's out o' the reach o' ghostes."

Mr. Cramphorn stopped and buried his beautiful Roman nose in some rum and water. Then Mrs. Pearn, mistress of the "Golden Anchor," mended the fire, and a man, sitting in the ingle, asked a question.

"Where's Jenifer to? 'Tis late for her to be out alone."

The old woman answered: —

"Gone up the hill for green stuff. Her laughs at all you silly men. I told her how 'twas the time for Lady Emma's death-coach; but her said so long as they didn't want her to get in an' sit along wi' she, her'd not mind no death-coaches, nor ghostes neither."

"'Tis very unseemly for a maid to talk so," de-

clared the stranger, gravely. "Them as flout spirits often have to pay an ugly reckoning."

Others were also of this mind and Mr. Cramp-horn gave instances.

"My stars! You'm makin' me cream with fear, I'm sure," said Mrs. Pearn, after supping full on their horrid recollections; "best to go up the hill, Jonathan Godbeer, an' find the wench. 'Tis your work, seeing you'm tokened to her."

The stranger started and cast a sharp glance where sat the man addressed. Merry Jonathan was a tall and square-built sailor with a curly head and an eye that looked all people squarely in the face. A crisp beard served to hide his true expression, and the cloak of a smile, usually to be found upon his lips, concealed the tremendous determination of his countenance. Indeed he habitually hid behind a mask of loud and somewhat senseless laughter. But those who served him at his secret work and in times of peril, knew a different Jonathan, not to be described as "Merry." Now the man rose and grinned at the stranger amiably until his grey eyes were quite lost in rays of crinkled skin. He out-stared the other seafarer, as he made it a rule to out-stare all men; then he prepared to obey his future mother-in-law.

"Mustn't let my sweetheart be drove daft by —" he began, when the inn door opened and a girl,

with her hair fallen down her back and a terrified white face, appeared and almost dropped into God-beer's arms. "Gude powers! What's the matter, my dear maid?" he cried. "Who've hurt 'e? Who've dared? Tell your Jonathan an' he'll smash the man like eggshells — if 'tis a man."

Jenifer clung to him hysterically and her teeth chattered. They took her to the fire and her mother brought a tumbler of spirits and water at Mr. Cramp-horn's direction.

"Oh my God, I knawed how 'twould be," wailed the old woman. "Her've seed what her didn't ought, an' now her'll suffer for it!"

Jenifer was on her lover's lap by the fire and tears at last came to her eyes. Then she wept bitterly and found her tongue.

"Put your arm around me," she said; "close — close — Jonathan. I've seed it — Lady Emma's death-coach — creeping awver the frozen ground up-along. It passed wi'in ten yards of where I was cutting cabbages, an' never such cold I felt. It have got to my heart an' I'll die — I knaw it."

"You might have been mistook, young woman," said the blue-muzzled man, civilly; but she shook her head.

"A gert hearse wi' feathers an' a tall man in front, an' four hosses all blacker'n the fir-wood they comed from. An' the moonlight shone through 'em where

they moved away to the churchyard; an' I fainted, I reckon, then come to an' sped away afore they returned."

"They'd have been there again in an hour or two," declared old Cramphorn. "That's the way of it. Ten o'clock or so they sets out, an' back they come by midnight or thereabouts."

Then the stranger rose to retire, but before doing so he declared his identity.

"I may tell you, neighbours, that I be the Preventive Officer sent to work along with the cutter from Dartmouth. My name be Robert Bluett, an' I'm an old man-o'-war's man an' a West countryman likewise. An' I look to every honest chap amongst 'e to help me in the King's name against law-breakers. So all's said."

A murmur ran through the company.

"Question is what be honest an' what ban't. Things ban't dishonest 'cause Parliament says so," growled a long-faced, sour man. "Free tradin's the right answer to wrongful laws, an' 'tis for them up-along to mend Justice, not rob us."

Jonathan Godbeer, however, stoutly applauded Mr. Bluett.

"I be just a simple fisherman myself," he said; "but what I can do against they French rascals I will do. You may count upon me."

Mr. Bluett regarded Johnny Cramphorn and saw

that the patriarch's eyes were fixed on Godbeer and full of amazement.

"You to say that!" he murmured, "you — when us all knows — but ban't no business of mine, thank the Lord. At least you may count upon an old man to stand by the King and his lawful laws, same as I always have and always will so long as I be spared."

Riotous laughter greeted these noble sentiments, and Bluett, vaguely aware that the company laughed as much with the ancient as at him, departed to bed. He was staying at the "Golden Anchor" until his lodgment at Daleham should be ready for him.

CHAPTER II

GREAT confusion, shouting and swearing kept Robert Bluett wakeful for some time, and next morning he learned the reason of it. As he walked early upon the quay before breakfast, tried to master the intricate coast-line at a glance and longed to be afloat that he might get a wider and juster view of the red and honeycombed cliffs, a woe-begone figure approached him — a bent and hobbling creature that crawled on two sticks, wore a three-cornered hat and had his right eye concealed by a big black patch. Only the flowing beard of Johnny Cramphorn proclaimed him.

"God save you, Master Bluett, or I should say 'Cap'n Bluett,'" he began. "The very man I wanted for to see."

"Who's been clawing you?" asked the Excise Officer.

"Who but the Dowl's own anointed? You heard the tantara in the tap-room? Well, 'twas upon an aged piece like me they varmint's falled like heathen wolves. Look here!"

He lifted his patch and showed a pale blue eye

set in a bruise as black as ink. Thus seen it suggested a jackdaw's.

"Jonathan Godbeer's hand done that — the Lord judge un! Wi' his bullock's fist he knocked me down, 'cause I withstood un to his face, like the prophet withstood David."

"Ban't no quarrel of mine," said Mr. Bluett, "though if all I hear be true, me an' Godbeer may fall out afore the world's much older."

"Ess — if you'm honest, you'll fall out wi' him. 'Twas honesty brought me these cruel bruises. When you'd gone, I rose in my wrath an' axed un how he dared to lie to you so open; then he smote me."

Mr. Bluett's natural probity here led him into unwisdom.

"To be plain," he said, "I haven't heard no very good account of you neither."

"Ah, 'tis so hard to get away from one's sins! I'll be honest, Cap'n, same as you be," answered Mr. Cramphorn. "I doan't deny but I've been a free-trader in my time, though 'twas little enough ever I made by it but a score on the wrong side of the Book o' Life. But I've long been weary of ill-doing and be set 'pon the right road this many years, as Parson Yates will tell 'e. 'Twas for the cause of right I got these blows — same as Paul his stripes — an' though I've been that man's friend in time past, now I'm gwaine to take vengeance

against un, an' next time I hears tell of his games, you'll be the fust to know it."

"That will suit me very well," answered Bluett.

"An' I ax you to back me up an' protect me henceforth in the King's name," continued Johnny. "To think of a man as would wallop an old blid like me! No better'n a murderer — there he is now! Doan't you go away from me till he've passed us by."

Jonathan Godbeer walked along the quay to the boats. He scowled at old Cramphorn and touched his hat to the officer.

"Marnin', sir! I see thicky old rat have got 'e by the ear. I thrashed un last night, ancient though he be, for calling me a smuggler afore the company; an' I'll thrash un every time he dares to do the like. Take care how you put your trust in him, for the Faither of Lies be a fule to that man. He never done nobody a gude turn in's life; though he'll get a gude turn yet hisself when the cart goes from under him an' leaves him dancin' 'pon a rope. I warn 'e against un for all his white beard!"

Jonathan grinned at his own prophecy and departed; Cramphorn shook his fist and chattered curses; and Mr. Bluett went upon this way. He was puzzled but not ill-pleased.

"When thieves fall out, honest men come by their own," he reflected, and returned to breakfast.

Jenifer Pearn waited upon him at his meal and took occasion to give Mr. Bluett yet another version of the brawl that had troubled his slumbers over night; but as she loved Merry Jonathan, her story redounded little to the smuggler's discredit.

"They all want to be your friends," she explained; "but, except my Jonathan, theer ban't a pin to choose among 'em. He'm honest as daylight."

Mr. Bluett thereupon changed the subject and trusted that Jenifer was none the worse for her fright. The girl had a dark, keen face, was built generously and evidently enjoyed unusual physical strength for a woman. Yet the old sailor recollected that she had been no more than a pleasant armful for her future husband.

"I be well again," she said, "yet I wish I hadn't seen no such dreadful contrivance, I'm sure. 'Tis a very sad thing, an' mother sez how Parson Yates did ought to be axed to faace they phantoms in the name of the Lord wi' a bell, a book an' a cannell, 'cordin' to the right an' holy way in such matters. But Gran'faither Newte an' Toby Pearn, my great-uncle, an' a gude few other auld parties say that Lady Emma's funeral be the chiefest glory of Daleham an' 'twould be a thousand pities to go an' lay it wi' a bit of parson's work."

The officer was interested.

"For my part," he said, "I think if the poor soul

killed herself two hundred years ago, 'tis time her was laid peaceful an' reg'lar as by law appointed. 'Tis all us can do for ghostes; to lay 'em; an' even then it axes a clergyman. An' the holiest have got to mind theer *p*'s an' *q*'s, for, make a mistake, an' so like as not they'm tored to pieces for their trouble."

"I'd rather not hear tell no more about it," answered Jenifer, shivering and looking uneasily about her. "But this I knaw; Parson Yates ban't the man for the job — so meek as Moses he be, an' would run from a goose, let alone a ghostey."

"If 'tis proved his duty, he've got to faace it, however, — same as all of us has got to faace our duty," declared Mr. Bluett.

CHAPTER III

A WEEK elapsed and the tragic dispute between Merry Jonathan and his ancient ally grew into a nine days' wonder. That the new-come representative of law was responsible for their quarrel none doubted, for Mr. Bluett had arrived in an hour not auspicious from the smugglers' standpoint. He was at Daleham a fortnight earlier than most people expected him, and the presence of himself and his mates had threatened directly to interfere with greater matters than he guessed. Yet the secret of a cargo, its arrival nigh Daleham and the hour and place, now came frankly into Robert Bluett's keeping, since old Cramphorn—his friendship turned to gall under Godbeer's heavy hands—for once followed the unfamiliar paths of rectitude. So, at least, he declared to the Exciseman, though even Mr. Bluett, whose mind was cast in simple mould, perceived that a private hatred and a private grudge were responsible for the patriarch's treachery, rather than any desire to do right. It was mention of his former partner that always stung old Johnny into passion, made his beard shake and his voice go shrill and cracked.

"A mighty haul of French fishes — brandy — baccy — lace an' such like; an' now I'm a changed man an' shall take no part," he explained to his new friend.

"Theer's foreign fal-lals 'bout that young woman to the inn," said Mr. Bluett. "Stuff that never comed honest about her neck, I'll swear."

"His gift. They'm tokened, though God send you'll lay un by the heels an' show her the mistake she'm makin' in time. An' now listen, for I doan't want to be seen with you in public no more. When I quarrelled with the man, — Godbeer, — I knowed he'd change the appointed date; an' sure enough he did so. But theer's wan hand of his crew — no call to name names — who be on my side; an' he've told me the real date. Which that is Wednesday next, if this here northeast wind holds."

"That's the day I be taking my men to Dartmouth."

"D'you think Merry Jonathan doan't know that? He knows everything. He knows I be talkin' to 'e now; but he doan't know what I've told 'e; and he'd be ravin' mad if he did."

"Us mustn't go to Dartmouth then."

"No fay! But you must let him think you have. You must start by day an' get back after dusk an' lie by the cliff roads — some of your chaps by each; for theer ban't no other ways up. An' the Darty-

mouth cutter must slip out the moment after dimpsy light; an' wi' any luck you'll take the Frenchman tu. Of course Wednesday be the day Cap'n Wade always sails west wi' the cutter. He'm such a man of method that the smugglers know to a mile wheer the fool be, so reg'lar as they know moon an' tides."

"I'll change all that," declared Bluett.

"An' best begin Wednesday; an' you must swear on your dying oath my name doan't come out. For Jonathan would swing for me, so cheerful as a flea, if he heard I'd informed."

The officer regarded Johnny with stern contempt.

"The dirty work of the world have got to be done; an' your breed never dies," he said; "you're not nice, but you're needful — like vultures an' jackals as I've seed around foreign ports. No, I'll not name you."

"As to reward? Theer's my friend tu, as have told me the secret. 'Tis right us should get our deserts for smashing that cowardly dog. An' God, He knows how poor I be. But theer'll be a thousand golden guineas in it for you, so like as not; an' if you take the foreigner, her'll be worth a Jew's-eye, for she's a butivul thing by all accounts, though if the cutter catches her 'twill be by stealth, not sailin'."

"'Twould make a stir," admitted the other,

cautiously. Then a sudden wave of suspicion crossed his mind.

"If you're lying to me, you'll repent it," he said.

"Judge by what I lose," retorted the old man, almost tearfully. "To put this harvest into your hands is to rob my own pocket. Baccy an' winter drinkin' — I give up all for the hate I bear against that man. But take my word or leave it."

Old Cramphorn's bitterness of expression and the lean fist raised and shaken at Merry Jonathan's empty boat hard by, went far to convince Mr. Bluett. That day he hired a horse and rode over to Dartmouth and in the evening met his secret accomplice again among the usual crowd at the bar of the "Golden Anchor." Jonathan Godbeer was not present, but the rest of the company now knew the officer by name and treated him with outward civility and respect.

The conversation ran on Lady Emma's death-coach. Even Parson Yates had been awakened from his abstracted existence by the reports of this singular apparition, for many had seen it of late and not a few fearfully approached their pastor upon the subject. That evening, indeed, the folk awaited news of some definite decision from Daleham's spiritual leader, because, as Jenifer Pearn told the Exciseman, though certain ancient celebrities had objected to interference with a vision so historical,

others held it a scandal that any patrician maiden's spirit should thus continue to revisit the scenes of her life and taking off. Greater matters occupied Robert Bluett's mind, but, sailor-like, he loved a ghost, and his life had not changed the superstitious nature of him. He listened with the rest, therefore, while Johnny related what had passed between himself and the clergyman.

"'Twas hard to shake sense into the old gen'leman. He doan't want to believe it, though theer's his open Bible staring him in the face every day of his life. But a man's reason be nought against the pull of conscience; so he'm gwaine up-along to see for hisself. Then, if the things do appear to his sight, he'll go forth in the name of the Lord to quench 'em."

"He'll never do it — such a timorous man as him," said Mrs. Pearn; but Cramphorn assured her that the deed was done.

"He've gone to-night. I started along with un. 'Shall I come with 'e, your reverence?' I axed him. An' he said 'No,' though he'd have liked to say 'Ess.' 'Who wants man's aid if his hand be in his Master's?' he sez to me. 'Not your reverence, that's sartain,' I sez to him. Then he went up-along and I comed in here."

Conversation continued and then, some half an hour later, a little man in clerical costume, with tiny

legs that shook beneath him, suddenly entered the inn. He was very pale and blinked at the blazing oil lamp above the bar.

"'Tis his reverence's self!" cried Mrs. Pearn.

"No less, my good woman, no less. A glass of your best brandy, please. I — I —"

"You'm gallied — you'm likewise skeered. I see it in your worshipful manner of shaking below the knee. I wish to God you had let me go along with 'e. But, my stars! you must have comed down Red Hill properly quick, if so be you went to the top of un."

"I did descend quickly, John Cramphorn. I have no hesitation in declaring that never have I come down that hill so fast before. The Lord looked to it that I dashed not my foot against a stone. And, furthermore, this apparition is no mere conceit of ignorance or bucolic fancy; I myself, my friends, have seen it; and I heartily wish that I had not done so."

"Pass the glass to his reverence, Jenifer, will 'e; an' get you out of the armchair, Toby, an' let minister come by the fire. I've put in hot water an' sugar an' the brandy be —"

She stopped. All men knew the brandy of the "Golden Anchor," but it was not considered good manners to criticise it.

Mr. Yates drank, then colour returned to his

little grey face and he passed his glass for a second dose.

"I could discourse upon this theme at very considerable length," he said; "but the matter calls for deeds rather than words, or perhaps I should say both."

"No doubt, as a man of God, your duty do lie clear afore you, if I may say so respectful," ventured Robert Bluett; and the pastor admitted that it was so.

"By the help of Heaven these unhappy beings, that here dwell midway between earth and heaven, must be laid to rest," he said. "Thaumaturgy, or working of miracles, can only still subsist at the desire of Jehovah, and if He wills that I liberate these funereal spirits to their rest, I can do it, not otherwise."

"I lay you'll do it, such a holy man as you," foretold Johnny Cramphorn, genially.

"But, for God's love, don't mess it up," added Mr. Bluett, "'cause if you make any error, they'll rend 'e to tatters."

"If Heaven wills and my health permits, I go on Tuesday night in all the dignity and power of my calling," declared Parson Yates; "and now I will thank you to see me home, such among you as journey on my way."

A few men departed with their pastor; Cramp-

horn settled to his last pipe and glass beside the fire; and Robert Bluett went upon his nocturnal duties. For, since his arrival, things were mightily changed at Daleham; keen eyes never closed on sea or land; most perfect cordons had been established and a sure system extended far to east and west. It was admitted that with such parole of cliffs and coombs, such searching scrutiny by night and day of every dark lane, lonely road and seaward-facing cavern, that not so much as a runlet of spirits could swim unrecorded into Daleham or ride out of it.

How Merry Jonathan under these distracting circumstances could continue to be merry, his friends and neighbours wondered. Indeed, twice within a week he had brought back from the sea pollock and conger — his legitimate objects of pursuit at this season. But that Jonathan Godbeer should sell fish was a significant sign of the times, and already folks said that Mr. Cramphorn was avenged.

CHAPTER IV

GENTLE snow fell through a grey night as a party of men and women marched up Red Hill upon the following Tuesday evening. An invisible moon made all this clear. Parson Yates led the way with his cassock hitched out of the snow and with a stout boy on either side of him. One lad bore a candle, and the other, a little bell.

"Butivul night for a holy deed, I'm sure," said Mr. Cramphorn. Mrs. Pearn, Jenifer and Mr. Bluett walked beside him and a dozen villagers accompanied them. The matter, however, at their pastor's desire had been kept as far as possible from the general ear.

"I hope as you'm lookin' sharp to the roads an' the quay an' Smugglers' Lane as usual," whispered Johnny to Robert Bluett. "Some long tongue be sure to blab this business; an' if the Frenchman's laying off, they might signal her in to-night, 'stead of to-morrow."

"Not so much as a sea-otter could go from sea to shore without one of my men would know it," answered the other.

"Then a great load be off my mind, I assure 'e."

Red Hill above Daleham was a sandstone bluff that sprang up near three hundred feet abruptly from the sea, and, save at low tides, deep water always ran beneath. Upon its head a rough tressure of wind-worn pine trees circled the grey ruins of Stapledon manor-house, and inland therefrom extended the fishermen's gardens and stretched two roads. One of these ways led to Daleham Church and the country; the other was that up which Parson Yates and his company now climbed from the village.

"Here will we stand," said the good man, "and should anything in the nature of a superhuman visitation occur, you must light your candle, Richard Trout, and you, Noah Collins, after I have lifted my voice the first time, must strike upon the bell thrice — for each Person of the Ever-blessed Trinity. And see no wax falls from the candle on to my book, boy."

They drew up outside the belt of fir and all endured half an hour of misery, for the snow, though slight, persisted and the air and earth were bitter cold. Presently, however, the snow thinned to scattered flakes, then stopped; a star stole out and touched the white carpet with silver. Then came the beat of the church clock telling ten, and, as if in answer, a sigh ran through the woods, and gloomy figures moved beneath the trees.

Silent as a dream and darker than night itself against the snow, a black pageant crept from the forest, and crossed the open land. One tall figure, above man's common stature, moved in front and, following him, came horses that drew a plumed hearse, while certain footmen moved orderly behind. Then did Dick Trout, with shaking blue fingers, strike tinder and make a flame, and Noah Collins prepared to beat a triple tattoo upon his bell. Only Mr. Yates himself unhappily failed at the critical pinch.

"Give it 'em; give it to 'em, my dear soul, or they'll be gone!" implored Mr. Cramphorn in frantic accents. But the little man had dropped his book from a numbed and shaking hand, and, by the time he had picked it up again, the ghostly funeral was sweeping along the church road, already half swallowed up by night.

"I lacked the power of speech," stuttered Mr. Yates. "I cannot deny it — the spirit of fear came upon me and I dropped my book."

"Give 'em a broadside coming back, your reverence — if 'tis true as they do come back," suggested Bluett.

Twenty minutes later a man approached by the road from the church, and Cramphorn eagerly enquired of him whether he had seen the funeral.

"Funeral? No, I seed no funeral," answered the

voice of Merry Jonathan. "Be that Parson Yates huntin' ghostes again?"

"We have come to liberate these unhappy phantoms and so far failed. They passed before I summoned presence of mind to address them."

"Passed?' When? Why for didn't I see 'em?"

"You!" snorted Johnny Cramphorn. "Who be the likes of you to see such holy things?"

Jonathan growled and approached Jenifer and her mother.

"Best you women come home, else you'll get your noses frozen off, an' the spirits won't thaw 'em for 'e, 'cepting those at home."

"Let us have no irreverence, Jonathan Godbeer," said the clergyman. "You will do better to add your prayers to ours, that my courage may be sustained and my voice strengthened for the coming ordeal."

The captain of the smugglers did not answer, but strode forth and walked over white ground lately traversed by the procession of spirits.

"Doan't 'e cross theer track, my dear man," cried Mrs. Pearn; "else ten to one they'll blast 'e crooked for the rest of your days!"

But her caution came too late. Godbeer stood and gazed upon the snow where the spectral hearse had passed. Then he lifted his voice and shouted with all his might.

"Gauger Bluett! Gauger Bluett! This here be your job, not parson's. Quick, man, quick! Ghostes or no ghostes, the snow's took their shoe marks if I see right. Boots an' hoofs an' wheels — no bogies them. Ha-ha! the spirits that passed along here was inside the hearse, not outside!"

The Exciseman and others rushed forward to find Merry Jonathan's words were true, for the new-fallen snow had been trampled with feet of men and horses, and seamed with tracks of heavy wheels.

"Theer now! I've often thought they rascals might have 'e that way, Cap'n," said Godbeer, with deep concern. "To think of the wickedness o' the world! Just come in the trees behind the ruin. 'Tweern't my business, of course, but more'n wance walkin' 'pon the beach below, takin' the air at low tide, I've looked up at the face of the cliff by night and fancied I seed ropes pulling things up the precipice. Then I thought, 'No — surely not. Can't be no hookem-snivey doings under darkness wi' such a man as Cap'n Bluett amongst us.'"

Jonathan grinned and the moon came out and touched his white teeth. Cramphorn held up a lantern, and Bluett himself uttered words not seemly for the ear of Parson Yates.

Then he turned to follow the direction of the smugglers' funeral.

"I bid every honest man come along with me in

the King's name," he cried. "Them as have done this deed shall smart for theer night's work yet!"

"Us'll all help 'e heart an' soul, I'm sure," declared Merry Jonathan. "We'm a thought behind the rogues, I fear. But what's that with right 'pon our side?"

They scrambled and hastened along the rutted snow, and Cramphorn and Godbeer commented in cheerful chorus on the event as they trotted beside the furious officer.

"What I'm fearin' is that these scamps have been at theer games all the week," gasped the aged Johnny while he shuffled forward. "Theer's a dark plot against our good name, and while we've all been countin' to rub it in to-morrow night, they've run theer cargo and hid it in the ruin of the Manor this longful time — pulled it up the cliff an' been takin' it away reg'lar night after night, while honest men was on the watch — some place else."

"Makes me near burst wi' rage," said Jonathan, "an' all them fine fellows ready, an' the cutter sailin' about over the sea so butivul! An' perhaps the cargo was run that very night Cap'n Bluett comed amongst us at the 'Golden Anchor,' an' told us what a great man he was. All play-actin', an' even my own girl Jenifer to come home so frightened. To think a man's own girl would deceive him so wicked!"

"Wi' Pastor Yates at his post tu, tryin' so hard to larn us all better!" panted Cramphorn.

Now ahead loomed a huge black object where crossways met at a lonely spot nearly a mile inland. It was empty and proved to be the skeleton of a farm waggon painted black, boarded up, and adorned with tufts of shavings dipped in tar. The snow had been trampled for twenty yards round about it and indications of other wheels diverged landward on three sides into the night.

Cramphorn, Godbeer and Robert Bluett, now far ahead of their companions, stood before this spectacle.

"They've done you, by G—I!" gasped the old man. "An' to think of all your bold heroes with their swords an' cutlasses an' pistols a-sitting freezing in every lane and by every drain an' rat-hole around the village! 'Tis amazin' such things be allowed to fall out."

The officer did not answer. He had seen the ancient and Godbeer grin amiably each upon the other, and now his thick skull appreciated the truth and he turned to chew his gall alone.

Merry Jonathan shouted after him.

"Ten to one they'll tell 'e that Maypole chap as walked in front of the funeral was a man by the name of Godbeer. But don't you b'lieve it, Cap'n. You'll never catch me an' Master Cramphorn in no such job."

"Though we've made up our difference, as becomes Christian men," declared Johnny.

Bluett turned and addressed them.

"They cry loudest who cry last," he said. "The stones be piled as'll hold you tight yet, you bowl-dacious thieves; an' the wood be seasoned as you'll swing from."

Cramphorn wagged his beard.

"My stars! Hark to un! Theer's a sour temper! Theer's sorry thanks for all we've done! 'Tis a very thankless generation for sartain. Gimme your arm back-along, Merry. We'm most tu good to mix wi' common men — you an' me — that's the naked truth of it."

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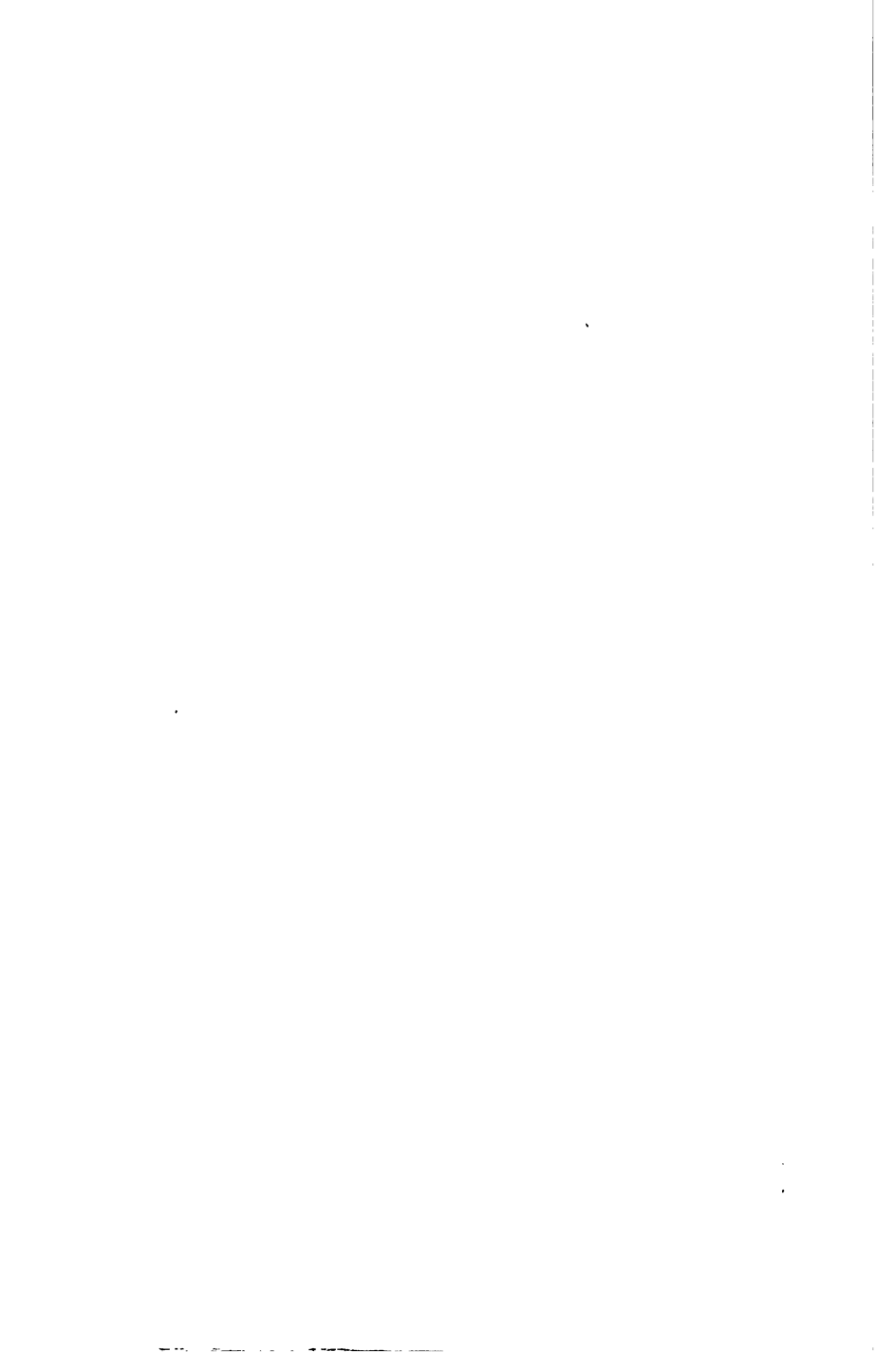
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